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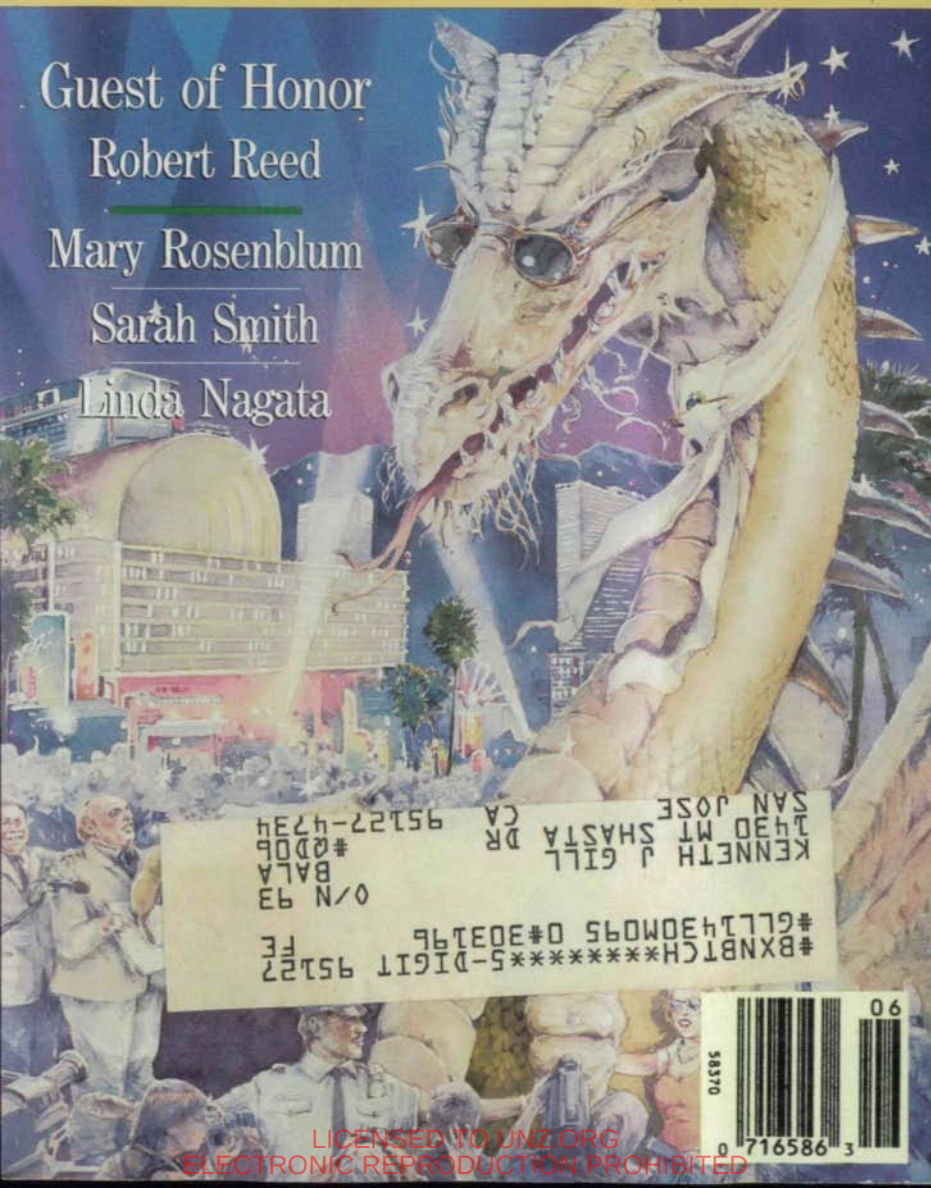

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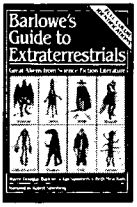

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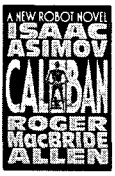

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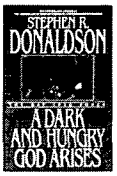

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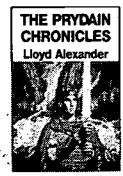

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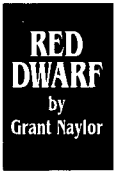

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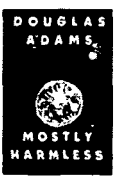

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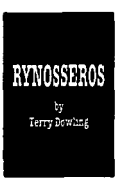

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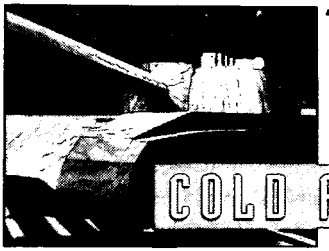

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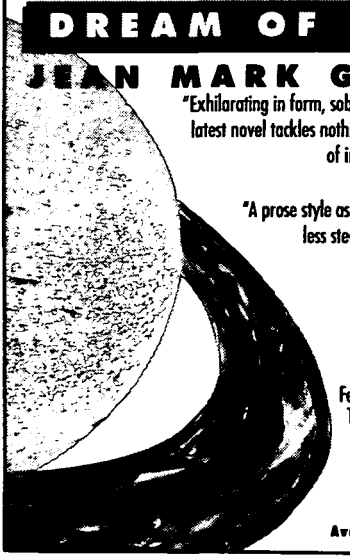

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Editorial

KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH

EVERY WINTER, I travel with ten other writers to Rockaway Beach on the Oregon coast. We each write a short story in a weekend, which sounds like a lot of work — and it is — but it also gives us time to walk on the beach, bake cookies, and have great conversations around the fire.

Rockaway Beach in January is difficult to get to and not very populated. The tourists go to other battlefront cities, like Seaside or Canon Beach. In the mornings, I would wander to the beach alone, and as I jogged in the sand, the only footprints in front of me would be the tiny three-pronged stick footprints that belonged to gulls. If I turned my back on the beachfront houses, all I saw was the ocean, frothing and moving with its own life. Each morning was sunny, and the ocean was blue and white, unusual this far north. The constant rumble of the waves was a soothing counterpoint to the silence of the town.

I felt as if I had reached the edge of the world.

And yet —

If I turned around, houses faced me. Some were closed against the morning, abandoned by the summer people. In another, a woman sat in a rocking chair, doing a crossword puzzle. In yet another, an elderly man held a steaming coffee mug and stared at the sea.

I was not alone, and I really didn't want to be.

That end-of-the-world alone feeling intensified when the power went out on Saturday night. In an unfamiliar house, with no phone, and only thin walls protecting us from the frosty night air, the veneer of civilization seemed thin. Dean Wesley Smith and I went into a nearby town for candles and firewood, and I was relieved to see the lights of the Safeway casting a glow across the parking lot.

I am not a pioneer. I prefer to walk ancient roads worn by many feet. I like the convenience of electric power and the ability to buy meat prepackaged at a grocery store. Yet, living in the American West, I am faced with pioneer memories all the time. Stories told by friends who can remember when the only north-south road in Idaho would be closed during

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bad weather, friends whose grandparents snowshoed across country. Houses litter the Cascade Range near the roads, but just off the highway lies open country as far as the eye can see. Markers record the stops on the Oregon Trail. If I half close my eyes, I can imagine what that would have looked like to travelers — hills and valleys and treacherous climbs that seemed to go on forever. Last year, traveling in a sudden snowstorm in Nevada's high mountain desert, our headlights caught a sign marking that empty countryside as part of the short-lived Pony Express Route. There, just for a second, shimmering outside my car window, was the terror a Pony Express rider felt when a sudden snowstorm caught him alone in that wide open country.

Sometimes, too, when I sit in my house in Oregon's Coastal Mountain Range, I wonder if a Native American stood in this spot, overlooking the valley, as the whites encroached. This house stands on an old logging road, played out so long ago that the gravel road exists beneath a two-inch layer of dirt. But below that is the dirt that supported Native American camps, and gave them protection from life in the marshy Willamette Valley, the place they called the Valley of Sickness.

Ancient roads. History layered with geology, stories written on top of stories. Yet when I stared at the ocean in Rockaway Beach, I felt as if the ocean had a life of its own, as if it were the end of roads and the beginning of a frontier. Stanislaw Lem wrote about the ocean as a sentient being in *Solaris*, a book I read long before I sat on an Oregon beachfront. I think of that novel each time I stand on the beach, each time I hear the shush-shush of the waves. I wonder what stories the ocean has, and what secrets it hides, and what its quiet voice is trying to tell us.

Sometimes I think it odd that science fiction stories come to mind when I stare at the ocean. But then I realize it is no more odd than the pieces of history I choose to see when I stand on a patch of ground. Each time, it is a way of affirming to myself that I am not alone. Others have stood before the ocean and wondered at its majesty. People have crossed snow-covered high mountain deserts and survived. Despite any sudden darkness I may find myself in, whether in Rockaway or in life, I find reassurance in stories — be they history or fiction — that somewhere down the road a store is open, a well-lit store with candles and firewood, where someone else has already gone to escape the gloom.

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Robert Reed has written five novels, the most recent of which is The Remarkables, *published by Bantam Spectra. He won the Grand Prize in the Writers of the Future contest, and his other short fiction has appeared in* Universe, Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine. *and, of course,* F&SF. *He writes that his home state of Nebraska provided the inspiration for the story — in an unusual way. "Winter arrived [this year] in the form of a near-blizzard, and even for Nebraska, this was unusual weather," he writes. "Two days before the snow, I was running intervals at the local track, my shirt sweat-soaked, the temperature in the high sixties. And humid. I mention this because weather plays a big role in 'Guest,' and because most SF seems to take place in worlds much more static than Nebraska."*

Guest of Honor

By Robert Reed

ONE OF THE ROBOTS OFFERED to carry Pico for the last hundred meters, on its back or cradled in its padded arms; but she shook her head emphatically, telling it, "Thank you, no. I can make it myself." The ground was grassy and soft, lit by glowglobes and the grass-colored moon. It wasn't a difficult walk, even with her bad hip, and she wasn't an invalid. She could manage, she thought with an instinctive independence. And as if to show them, she struck out ahead of the half-dozen robots as they unloaded the big skimmer, stacking Pico's gifts in their long arms. She was halfway across the paddock before they caught her. By then she could hear the muddled voices and laughter coming from the hill-like tent straight ahead. By then she was breathing fast for reasons other than her pain. For fear, mostly. But it was a different flavor of fear than the kinds she knew. What was happening now was beyond her control, and inevitable . . . and it was that kind of certainty that made her stop after a few more steps, one hand rubbing at her hip for no

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reason except to delay her arrival. If only for a moment or two. . . .

"Are you all right?" asked one robot.

She was gazing up at the tent, dark and smooth and gently rounded. "I don't want to be here," she admitted. "That's all." Her life on board the *Kyber* had been spent with robots — they had outnumbered the human crew ten to one, then more — and she could always be ruthlessly honest with them. "This is madness. I want to leave again."

"Only, you can't," responded the ceramic creature. The voice was mild, unnervingly patient. "You have nothing to worry about."

"I know."

"The technology has been perfected since —"

"I know."

It stopped speaking, adjusting its hold on the colorful packages.

"That's not what I meant," she admitted. Then she breathed deeply, holding the breath for a moment and exhaling, saying, "All right. Let's go. Go."

The robot pivoted and strode toward the giant tent. The leading robots triggered the doorway, causing it to fold upward with a sudden rush of golden light flooding across the grass, Pico squinting and then blinking, walking faster now and allowing herself the occasional low moan.

"Ever wonder how it'll feel?" Tyson had asked her.

The tent had been pitched over a small pond, probably that very day, and in places the soft, thick grasses had been matted flat by people and their robots. So many people, she thought. Pico tried not to look at any faces. For a moment, she gazed at the pond, shallow and richly green, noticing the tamed waterfowl sprinkled over it and along its shoreline. Ducks and geese, she realized. And some small, crimson-headed cranes. Lifting her eyes, she noticed the large, omega-shaped table near the far wall. She couldn't count the place settings, but it seemed a fair assumption there were sixty-three of them. Plus a single round table and chair in the middle of the omega — *my table* — and she took another deep breath, looking higher, noticing floating glowglobes and several indigo swallows flying around them, presumably snatching up the insects that were drawn to the yellow-white light.

People were approaching. Since she had entered, in one patient rush, all sixty-three people had been climbing the slope while shouting, "Pico!

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Hello!" Their voices mixed together, forming a noisy, senseless paste. "Greetings!" they seemed to say. "Hello, hello!"

They were brightly dressed, flowing robes swishing and everyone wearing big-rimmed hats made to resemble titanic flowers. The people sharply contrasted with the gray-white shells of the robot servants. Those hats were a new fashion, Pico realized. One of the little changes made during these past decades . . . and finally she made herself look at the faces themselves, offering a forced smile and taking a step backward, her belly aching, but her hip healed. The burst of adrenaline hid the deep ache in her bones. Wrestling one of her hands into a wave, she told her audience, "Hello," with a near-whisper. Then she swallowed and said, "Greetings to you!" Was that her voice? She very nearly didn't recognize it.

A woman broke away from the others, almost running toward her. Her big, flowery hat began to work free, and she grabbed the fat, petalish brim and began to fan herself with one hand, the other hand touching Pico on the shoulder. The palm was damp and quite warm; the air suddenly stank of overly sweet perfumes. It was all Pico could manage not to cough. The woman — what was her name? — was asking, "Do you need to sit? We heard . . . about your accident. You poor girl. All the way fine, and then on the last world. Of all the luck!"

Her hip. The woman was jabbering about her sick hip.

Pico nodded and confessed, "Sitting would be nice, yes."

A dozen voices shouted commands. Robots broke into runs, racing one another around the pond to grab the chair beside the little table. The drama seemed to make people laugh. A nervous, self-conscious laugh. When the lead robot reached the chair and started back, there was applause. Another woman shouted, "Mine won! Mine won!" She threw her hat into the air and tried to follow it, leaping as high as possible.

Some man cursed her sharply, then giggled.

Another man forced his way ahead, emerging from the packed bodies in front of Pico. He was smiling in a strange fashion. Drunk or drugged . . . what was permissible these days? With a sloppy, earnest voice, he asked, "How'd it happen? The hip thing . . how'd you do it?"

He should know. She had dutifully filed her reports throughout the mission, squirting them home. Hadn't he seen them? But then she noticed the watchful, excited faces — no exceptions — and someone seemed to

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read her thoughts, explaining, "We'd love to hear it *firsthand.* Tell, tell, tell!"

As if they needed to hear a word, she thought, suddenly feeling quite cold.

Her audience grew silent. The robot arrived with the promised chair, and she sat and stretched her bad leg out in front of her, working to focus her mind. It was touching, their silence . . . reverent and almost childlike . . . and she began by telling them how she had tried climbing Miriam Prime with two other crew members. Miriam Prime was the tallest volcano on a brutal super-Venusian world; it was brutal work because of the terrain and their massive lifesuits, cumbersome refrigeration units strapped to their backs, and the atmosphere thick as water. Scalding and acidic. Carbon dioxide and water made for a double greenhouse effect. . . . And she shuddered, partly for dramatics and partly from the memory. Then she said, "Brutal," once again, shaking her head thoughtfully.

They had used hyperthreads to climb the steepest slopes and the cliffs. Normally hyperthreads were virtually unbreakable; but Miriam was not a normal world. She described the basalt cliff and the awful instant of the tragedy; the clarity of the scene startled her. She could feel the heat seeping into her suit, see the dense, dark air, and her arms and legs shook with exhaustion. She told sixty-three people how it felt to be suspended on an invisible thread, two friends and a winch somewhere above in the acidic fog. The winch had jammed without warning, she told; the worst bad luck made it jam where the thread was its weakest. This was near the mission's end, and all the equipment was tired. Several dozen alien worlds had been visited, many mapped for the first time, and every one of them examined up close. As planned.

"Everything has its limits," she told them, her voice having an ominous quality that she hadn't intended.

Even hyperthreads had limits. Pico was dangling, talking to her companions by radio; and just as the jam was cleared, a voice saying, "There . . . got it!", the thread parted. He didn't have any way to know it had parted. Pico was falling, gaining velocity, and the poor man was ignorantly telling her, "It's running strong. You'll be up in no time, no problem. . . ."

People muttered to themselves.

"Oh my," they said.

"Gosh."

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"Shit."

Their excitement was obvious, perhaps even overdone. Pico almost laughed, thinking they were making fun of her storytelling . . . thinking, *What do they know about such things?* . . . Only, they were sincere, she realized a moment later. They were enraptured with the image of Pico's long fall, her spinning and lashing out with both hands, fighting to grab anything and slow her fall any way possible —

— and she struck a narrow shelf of eroded stone, the one leg shattered and telescoping down to a gruesome stump. Pico remembered the painless shock of the impact and that glorious instant free of all sensation. She was alive, and the realization had made her giddy. Joyous. Then the pain found her head — a great nauseating wave of pain — and she heard her distant friends shouting, "Pico? Are you there? Can you hear us? Oh Pico . . . *Pico!* Answer us!"

She had to remain absolutely motionless, sensing that any move would send her tumbling again. She answered in a whisper, telling her friends that she was alive, yes, and please, please hurry. But they had only a partial thread left, and it would take them more than half an hour to descend . . . and she spoke of her agony and the horror, her hip and leg screaming, and not just from the impact. It was worse than mere broken bone, the lifesuit's insulation damaged and the heat bleeding inward, slowly and thoroughly cooking her living flesh.

Pico paused, gazing out at the round-mouthed faces.

So many people and not a breath of sound; and she was having fun. She realized her pleasure almost too late, nearly missing it. Then she told them, "I nearly died," and shrugged her shoulders. "All the distances traveled, every imaginable adventure . . . and I nearly died on one of our last worlds, doing an ordinary climb. . . ."

Let them appreciate her luck, she decided. *Their luck.*

Then another woman lifted her purple flowery hat with both hands, pressing it flush against her own chest. "Of course you survived!" she proclaimed. "You wanted to come home, Pico! You couldn't stand the thought of *dying.*"

Pico nodded without comment, then said, "I was rescued. Obviously." She flexed the damaged leg, saying, "I never really healed," and she touched her hip with reverence, admitting, "We didn't have the resources on board the *Kyber.* This was the best our medical units could do."

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Her mood shifted again, without warning. Suddenly she felt sad to tears, eyes dropping and her mouth clamped shut.

"We worried about you, Pico!"

"All the time, dear!"

". . . in our prayers . . .!"

Voices pulled upon each other, competing to be heard. The faces were smiling and thoroughly sincere. Handsome people, she was thinking. Clean and civilized and older than her by centuries. Some of them were more than a thousand years old.

Look at them! she told herself.

And now she felt fear. Pulling both legs toward her chest, she hugged herself, weeping hard enough to dampen her trouser legs; and her audience said, "But you made it, Pico! You came home! The wonders you've seen, the places you've actually touched . . . with those hands. . . . And we're so proud of you! So proud! You've proven your worth a thousand times, Pico! You're made of the very best stuff —!"

— which brought laughter, a great clattering roar of laughter, the joke obviously and apparently tireless.

Even after so long.

THEY WERE Pico; Pico was they.

Centuries ago, during the Blossoming, technologies had raced forward at an unprecedented rate. Starships like the *Kyber* and a functional immortality had allowed the first missions to the distant worlds, and there were some grand adventures. Yet adventure requires some element of danger; exploration has never been a safe enterprise. Despite precautions, there were casualties. People who had lived for centuries died suddenly, oftentimes in stupid accidents; and it was no wonder that after the first wave of missions came a long moratorium. No new starships were built, and no sensible person would have ridden inside even the safest vessel. Why risk yourself? Whatever the benefits, why taunt extinction when you have a choice.

Only recently had a solution been invented. Maybe it was prompted by the call of deep space, though Tyson used to claim, "It's the boredom on Earth that inspired them. That's why they came up with their elaborate scheme."

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The near-immortals devised ways of making highly gifted, highly trained crews from themselves. With computers and genetic engineering, groups of people could pool their qualities and create compilation humans. Sixty-three individuals had each donated moneys and their own natures, and Pico was the result. She was a grand and sophisticated average of the group. Her face was a blending of every face; her body was a feminine approximation of their own varied bodies. In a few instances, the engineers had planted synthetic genes — for speed and strength, for example — and her brain had a subtly different architecture. Yet basically Pico was their offspring, a stewlike clone. The second of two clones, she knew. The first clone created had had subtle flaws, and he was painlessly destroyed just before birth.

Pico and Tyson and every other compilation person had been born at adult size. Because she was the second attempt, and behind schedule, Pico was thrown straight into her training. Unlike the other crew members, she had spent only a minimal time with her parents. Her sponsors. Whatever they were calling themselves. That and the long intervening years made it difficult to recognize faces and names. She found herself gazing out at them, believing they were strangers, their tireless smiles hinting at something predatory. The neat white teeth gleamed at her, and she wanted to shiver again, holding the knees closer to her mouth.

Someone suggested opening the lovely gifts.

A good idea. She agreed, and the robots brought down the stacks of boxes, placing them beside and behind her. The presents were a young tradition; when she was leaving Earth, the first compilation people were returning with little souvenirs of their travels. Pico had liked the gesture and had done the same. One after another, she started reading the names inscribed in her own flowing handwriting. Then each person stepped forward, thanking her for the treasure, then greedily unwrapping it, the papers flaring into bright colors as they were bent and twisted and torn, then tossed aside for the robots to collect.

She knew none of these people, and that was wrong. What she should have done, she realized, was go into the *Kyber's* records and memorize names and faces. It would have been easy enough, and proper, and she felt guilty for never having made the effort.

It wasn't merely genetics that she shared with these people; she also embodied slivers of their personalities and basic tendencies. Inside Pico's

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sophisticated womb, the computers had blended together their shrugs and tongue clicks and the distinctive patterns of their speech. She had emerged as an approximation of every one of them; yet why didn't she feel a greater closeness? Why wasn't there a strong, tangible bond here?

Or was there something — only, she wasn't noticing it?

One early gift was a slab of mirrored rock. "From Tween V," she explained. "What it doesn't reflect, it absorbs and reemits later. I kept that particular piece in my own cabin, fixed to the outer wall —"

"Thank you, thank you," gushed the woman.

For an instant, Pico saw herself reflected on the rock. She looked much older than these people. Tired, she thought. Badly weathered. In the cramped starship, they hadn't the tools to revitalize aged flesh, nor had there been the need. Most of the voyage had been spent in cold-sleep. Their waking times, added together, barely exceeded forty years of biological activity.

"Look at this!" the woman shouted, turning and waving her prize at the others. "Isn't it lovely?"

"A shiny rock," teased one voice. "Perfect!"

Yet the woman refused to be anything but impressed. She clasped her prize to her chest and giggled, merging with the crowd and then vanishing.

They look like children, Pico told herself.

At least how she imagined children to appear . . . unworldly and spoiled, needing care and infinite patience. . . .

She read the next name, and a new woman emerged to collect her gift. "My, what a large box!" She tore at the paper, then the box's lid, then eased her hands into the dunnage of white foam. Pico remembered wrapping this gift — one of the only ones where she was positive of its contents — and she happily watched the smooth, elegant hands pulling free a greasy and knob-faced nut. Then Pico explained:

"It's from the Yult Tree on Proxima Centauri 2." The only member of the species on that strange little world. "If you wish, you can break its dormancy with liquid nitrogen. Then plant it in pure quartz sand, never anything else. Sand, and use red sunlight —"

"I know how to cultivate them," the woman snapped.

There was a sudden silence, uneasy and prolonged.

Finally Pico said, "Well . . . good. . . ."

"Everyone knows about Yult nuts," the woman explained. "They're

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practically giving them away at the greeneries now."

Someone spoke sharply, warning her to stop and think.

"I'm sorry," she responded. "If I sound ungrateful, I mean. I was just thinking, hoping . . . I don't know. Never mind."

A weak, almost inconsequential apology, and the woman paused to feel the grease between her fingertips.

The thing was, Pico thought, that she had relied on guesswork in selecting these gifts. She had decided to represent every alien world, and she felt proud of herself on the job accomplished. Yult Trees were common on Earth? But how could she know such a thing? And besides, why should it matter? She had brought the nut and everything else because she'd taken risks, and these people were obviously too ignorant and silly to appreciate what they were receiving.

Rage had replaced her fear.

Sometimes she heard people talking among themselves, trying to trade gifts. Gemstones and pieces of alien driftwood were being passed about like orphans. Yet nobody would release the specimens of odd life-forms from living worlds, transparent canisters holding bugs and birds and whatnot inside preserving fluids or hard vacuums. If only she had known what she couldn't have known, these silly brats. . . . And she found herself swallowing, holding her breath, and wanting to scream at all of them.

Pico was a compilation, yet she wasn't.

She hadn't lived one day as these people had lived their entire lives. She didn't know about comfort or changelessness, and with an attempt at empathy, she tried to imagine such an incredible existence.

Tyson used to tell her, "Shallowness is a luxury. Maybe the ultimate luxury." She hadn't understood him. Not really. "Only the rich can master true frivolity." Now those words echoed back at her, making her think of Tyson. That intense and angry man . . . the opposite of frivolity, the truth told.

And with that, her mood shifted again. Her skin tingled. She felt nothing for or against her audience. How could they help being what they were? How could anyone help their nature? And with that, she found herself reading another name on another unopened box. A little box, she saw. Probably another one of the unpopular gemstones, born deep inside an alien crust and thrown out by forces unimaginable. . . .

There was a silence, an odd stillness, and she repeated the name.

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"Opera? Opera Ting?"

Was it her imagination, or was there a nervousness running through the audience? Just what was happening —?

"Excuse me?" said a voice from the back. "Pardon?"

People began moving aside, making room, and a figure emerged. A male, something about him noticeably different. He moved with a telltale lightness, with a spring to his gait. Smiling, he took the tiny package while saying, "Thank you," with great feeling. "For my father, thank you. I'm sure he would have enjoyed this moment. I only wish he could have been here, if only. . . ."

Father? Wasn't this Opera Ting?

Pico managed to nod, then she asked, "Where is he? I mean, is he busy somewhere?"

"Oh no. He died, I'm afraid." The man moved differently because he was different. He was young — even younger than I, Pico realized — and he shook his head, smiling in a serene way. Was he a clone? A biological child? What? "But on his behalf," said the man, "I wish to thank you. Whatever this gift is, *I* will treasure it. I promise you. I know you must have gone through hell to find it and bring it to me, and thank you so very much, Pico. Thank you, thank you. Thank you!"

Death.

An appropriate intruder in the evening's festivities, thought Pico. Some accident, some kind of tragedy . . . something had killed one of her sixty-three parents, and that thought pleased her. There was a pang of guilt woven into her pleasure, but not very much. It was comforting to know that even these people weren't perfectly insulated from death; it was a force that would grasp everyone, given time. Like it had taken Midge, she thought. And Uoo, she thought. *And Tyson.*

Seventeen compilated people had embarked on *Kyber,* representing almost a thousand near-immortals. Only nine had returned, including Pico. Eight friends were lost. . . . *Lost* was a better word than *death,* she decided. . . . And usually it happened in places worse than any Hell conceived by human beings.

After Opera — his name, she learned, was the same as his father's — the giving of the gifts settled into a routine. Maybe it was because of the young man's attitude. People seemed more polite, more self-contained. Someone

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had the presence to ask for another story. Anything she wished to tell. And Pico found herself thinking of a watery planet circling a distant red-dwarf sun, her voice saying, "Coldtear," and watching faces nod in unison. They recognized the name, and it was too late. It wasn't the story she would have preferred to tell, yet she couldn't seem to stop herself. Coldtear was on her mind.

Just tell parts, she warned herself.

What you can stand!

The world was terran-class and covered with a single ocean frozen on its surface and heated from below. By tides, in part. And by Coldtear's own nuclear decay. It had been Tyson's idea to build a submersible and dive to the ocean's remote floor. He used spare parts in *Kyber's* machine shop — the largest room on board — then he'd taken his machine to the surface, setting it on the red-stained ice and using lasers and robot help to bore a wide hole and keep it clear.

Pico described the submersible, in brief, then mentioned that Tyson had asked her to accompany him. She didn't add that they'd been lovers now and again, nor that sometimes they had feuded. She'd keep those parts of the story to herself for as long as possible.

The submersible's interior was cramped and ascetic, and she tried to impress her audience with the pressures that would build on the hyperfiber hull. Many times the pressure found in Earth's oceans, she warned; and Tyson's goal was to set down on the floor, then don a lifesuit protected with a human-shaped force field, actually stepping outside and taking a brief walk.

"Because we need to leave behind footprints," he had argued. "Isn't that why we've come here? We can't just leave prints up on the ice. It moves and melts, wiping itself clean every thousand years or so."

"But isn't that the same below?" Pico had responded. "New muds rain down — slowly, granted — and quakes cause slides and avalanches."

"So we pick right. We find someplace where our marks will be quietly covered. Enshrouded. Made everlasting."

She had blinked, surprised that Tyson cared about such things.

"I've studied the currents," he explained, "and the terrain —"

"Are you serious?" Yet you couldn't feel certain about Tyson. He was a creature full of surprises. "All this trouble, and for what —?"

"Trust me, Pico. Trust me!"

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Tyson had had an enormous laugh. His parents, sponsors, whatever—an entirely different group of people — had purposefully made him larger than the norm. They had selected genes for physical size, perhaps wanting Tyson to dominate the *Kyber's* crew in at least that one fashion. If his own noise was to be believed, that was the only tinkering done to him. Otherwise, he was a pure compilation of his parents' traits, fiery and passionate to a fault. It was a little unclear to Pico what group of people could be so uniformly aggressive; yet Tyson had had his place in their tight-woven crew, and he had had his charms in addition to his size and the biting intelligence.

"Oh Pico," he cried out. "What's this about, coming here? If it's not about leaving traces of our passage . . . then *what?*"

"It's about going home again," she had answered.

"Then why do we leave the *Kyber?* Why not just orbit Coldtear and send down our robots to explore?"

"Because. . . ."

"Indeed! Because!" The giant head nodded, and he put a big hand on her shoulder. "I knew you'd see my point. I just needed to give you time, my friend."

She agreed to the deep dive, but not without misgivings.

And during their descent, listening to the ominous creaks and groans of the hull while lying flat on their backs, the misgivings began to reassert themselves.

It was Tyson's fault, and maybe his aim.

No, she thought. It was most definitely his aim.

At first, she thought it was some game, him asking, "Do you ever wonder how it will feel? We come home and are welcomed, and then our dear parents disassemble our brains and implant them —"

"Quiet," she interrupted. "We agreed. Everyone agreed. We aren't going to talk about it, all right?"

A pause, then he said, "Except, I know. How it feels, I mean."

She heard him, then she listened to him take a deep breath from the close, damp air; and finally she had strength enough to ask, "How can you know?"

When Tyson didn't answer, she rolled onto her side and saw the outline of his face. A handsome face, she thought. Strong and incapable of any doubts. This was the only taboo subject among the compilations — "How will it feel?" — and it was left to each of them to decide what they believed.

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Was it a fate or a reward? To be subdivided and implanted into the minds of dozens and dozens of near-immortals. . . .

It wasn't a difficult trick, medically speaking.

After all, each of their minds had been designed for this one specific goal. Memories and talent; passion and training. All of the qualities would be saved — diluted, but, in the same instant, gaining their own near-immortality. Death of a sort, but a kind of everlasting life, too.

That was the creed by which Pico had been born and raised.

The return home brings a great reward, and peace.

Pico's first memory was of her birth, spilling slippery-wet from the womb and coughing hard, a pair of doctoring robots bent over her, whispering to her, "Welcome, child. Welcome. You've been born from *them* to be joined with *them* when it is time. . . . We promise you. . . !"

Comforting noise, and mostly Pico had believed it.

But Tyson had to say, "I know how it feels, Pico," and she could make out his grin, his amusement patronizing. Endless.

"How?" she muttered. "How do you know — ?"

"Because some of my parents . . . well, let's just say that I'm not their first time. Understand me?"

"They made another compilation?"

"One of the very first, yes. Which was incorporated into them before I was begun, and which was incorporated into me because there was a spare piece. A leftover chunk of the mind —"

"You're making this up, Tyson!"

Except, he wasn't, she sensed. Knew. Several times, on several early worlds, Tyson had seemed too knowledgeable about too much. Nobody could have prepared himself that well, she realized. She and the others had assumed that Tyson was intuitive in some useful way. Part of him was from another compilation? From someone like them? A fragment of the man had walked twice beside the gray dust sea of Pliicker, and it had twice climbed the giant ant mounds on Proxima Centauri 2. It was a revelation, unnerving and hard to accept; and just the memory of that instant made her tremble secretly, facing her audience, her tired blood turning to ice.

Pico told none of this to her audience.

Instead, they heard about the long descent and the glow of rare life-forms outside — a thin plankton consuming chemical energies as they found them — and, too, the growing creaks of the spherical hull.

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They didn't hear how she asked, "So how does it feel? You've got a piece of compilation inside you . . . all right! Are you going to tell me what it's like?"

They didn't hear about her partner's long, deep laugh.

Nor could they imagine him saying, "Pico, my dear. You're such a passive, foolish creature. That's why I love you. So docile, so damned innocent —"

"Does it live inside you, Tyson?"

"It depends on what you consider life."

"Can you feel its presence? I mean, does it have a personality? An existence? Or have you swallowed it all up?"

"I don't think I'll tell." Then the laugh enlarged, and the man lifted his legs and kicked at the hyperfiber with his powerful muscles. She could hear, and feel, the solid impacts of his bootheals. She knew that Tyson's strength was nothing compared to the ocean's mass bearing down on them, their hull scarcely feeling the blows . . . yet some irrational part of her was terrified. She had to reach out, grasping one of his trouser legs and tugging hard, telling him:

"Don't! Stop that! Will you please . . . quit!?"

The tension shifted direction in an instant.

Tyson said, "I was lying," and then added, "About knowing. About having a compilation inside me." And he gave her a huge hug, laughing in a different way now. He nearly crushed her ribs and lungs. Then he spoke into one of her ears, offering more, whispering with the old charm, and she accepting his offer. They did it as well as possible, considering their circumstances and the endless groaning of their tiny vessel; and she remembered all of it while her voice, detached but thorough, described how they had landed on top of something rare. There was a distinct *crunch* of stone. They had made their touchdown on the slope of a recent volcano — an island on an endless plain of mud — and afterward they dressed in their lifesuits, triple-checked their force fields, then flooded the compartment and crawled into the frigid, pressurized water.

It was an eerie, almost indescribable experience to walk on that ocean floor. When language failed Pico, she tried to use silence and oblique gestures to capture the sense of endless time and the cold and darkness. Even when Tyson ignited the submersible's outer lights, making the nearby terrain bright as late afternoon, there was the palpable taste of

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endless dark just beyond. She told of feeling the pressure despite the force field shrouding her; she told of climbing after Tyson, scrambling up a rough slope of youngish rock to a summit where they discovered a hot-water spring that pumped heated, mineral-rich water up at them.

That might have been the garden spot of Coldtear. Surrounding the spring was a thick, almost gelatinous mass of gray-green bacteria, pulsating and fat by its own standards. She paused, seeing the scene all over again. Then she assured her parents, "It had a beauty. I mean it. An elegant, minimalist beauty."

Nobody spoke.

Then someone muttered, "I can hardly wait to remember it," and gave a weak laugh.

The audience became uncomfortable, tense and too quiet. People shot accusing looks at the offender, and Pico worked not to notice any of it. A bitterness was building in her guts, and she sat up straighter, rubbing at both hips.

Then a woman coughed for attention, waited, and then asked, "What happened next?"

Pico searched for her face.

"There was an accident, wasn't there? On Coldtear . . . ?"

I won't tell them, thought Pico. Not now. Not this way.

She said, "No, not then. Later." And maybe some of them knew better. Judging by the expressions, a few must have remembered the records. Tyson died on the first dive. It was recorded as being an equipment failure — Pico's lie — and she'd hold on to the lie as long as possible. It was a promise she'd made to herself and kept all these years.

Shutting her eyes, she saw Tyson's face smiling at her. Even through the thick faceplate and the shimmering glow of the force field, she could make out the mischievous expression, eyes glinting, the large mouth saying, "Go on back, Pico. In and up and a safe trip to you, pretty lady."

She had been too stunned to respond, gawking at him.

"Remember? I've still got to leave my footprints somewhere —"

"What are you planning?" she interrupted.

He laughed and asked, "Isn't it obvious? I'm going to make my mark on this world. It's dull and nearly dead, and I don't think anyone is ever going to return here. Certainly not to *here.* Which means I'll be pretty well left alone —"

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"Your force field will drain your batteries," she argued stupidly. Of course he knew that salient fact. "If you stay here —!"

"I know, Pico. I know."

"But why —?"

"I lied before. About lying." The big face gave a disappointed look, then the old smile reemerged. "Poor, docile Pico. I knew you wouldn't take this well. You'd take it too much to heart . . . which I suppose is why I asked you along in the first place. . . ." And he turned away, starting to walk through the bacterial mat with threads and chunks kicked loose, sailing into the warm current and obscuring him. It was a strange gray snow moving against gravity. Her last image of Tyson was of a hulking figure amid the living goo; and to this day, she had wondered if she could have wrestled him back to the submersible — an impossibility, of course — and how far could he have walked before his force field failed.

Down the opposite slope and onto the mud, no doubt.

She could imagine him walking fast, using his strength . . . fighting the deep, cold muds . . . Tyson plus that fragment of an earlier compilation — and who was driving whom? she asked herself. Again and again and again.

Sometimes she heard herself asking Tyson, "How does it feel having a sliver of another soul inside you?"

His ghost never answered, merely laughing with his booming voice.

She hated him for his suicide, and admired him; and sometimes she cursed him for taking her along with him and for the way he kept cropping up in her thoughts. . . . " Damn you, Tyson. Goddamn you, goddamn you . . . !"

NO MORE presents remained.

One near-immortal asked, "Are we hungry?", and others replied, "Famished," in one voice, then breaking into laughter.

The party moved toward the distant tables, a noisy mass of bodies surrounding Pico. Her hip had stiffened while sitting, but she worked hard to move normally, managing the downslope toward the pond and then the little wooden bridge spanning a rocky brook. The waterfowl made grumbling sounds, angered by the disturbances; Pico stopped and watched them, finally asking, "What kinds are those?" She meant the ducks.

"Just mallards," she heard. "Nothing fancy."

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Yet, to her, they seemed like miraculous creatures, vivid plumage and the moving eyes, wings spreading as a reflex and their nervous motions lending them a sense of muscular power. A vibrancy.

Someone said, "You've seen many birds, I'm sure."

Of a sort, yes. . . .

"What were your favorites, Pico?"

They were starting uphill, quieter now, feet making a swishing sound in the grass; and Pico told them about the pterosaurs of Wilder, the man-sized bats on Little Quark, and the giant insects — a multitude of species — thriving in the thick, warm air of Tau Ceti I.

"Bugs," grumbled someone. "Uggh!"

"Now, now," another person responded.

Then a third joked, "I'm not looking forward to *that*. Who wants to trade memories?"

A joke, thought Pico, because memories weren't tradable properties. Minds were holographic — every piece held the basic picture of the whole — and these people each would receive a sliver of Pico's whole self. Somehow that made her smile, thinking how none of them would be spared. Every terror and every agony would be set inside each of them. In a diluted form, of course. The *Pico-ness* minimized. Made manageable. Yet it was something, wasn't it? It pleased her to think that a few of them might awaken in the night, bathed in sweat after dreaming of Tyson's death . . . just as she had dreamed of it time after time . . . her audience given more than they had anticipated, a dark little joke of her own. . . .

They reached the tables, Pico taking hers and sitting, feeling rather self-conscious as the others quietly assembled around her, each of them knowing where they belonged. She watched their faces. The excitement she had sensed from the beginning remained; only, it seemed magnified now. More colorful, more intense. Facing toward the inside of the omega, her hosts couldn't quit staring, forever smiling, scarcely able to eat once the robots brought them plates filled with steaming foods.

Fancy meals, Pico learned.

The robot setting her dinner before her explained, "The vegetables are from Triton, miss. A very special and much-prized strain. And the meat is from a wild hound killed just yesterday —"

"Really?"

"As part of the festivities, yes." The ceramic face, white and expression-

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less, stared down at her. "There have been hunting parties and games, among other diversions. Quite an assortment of activities, yes."

"For how long?" she asked. "These festivities . . . have they been going on for days?"

"A little longer than three months, miss."

She had no appetite; nonetheless, she lifted her utensils and made the proper motions, reminding herself that three months of continuous parties would be nothing to these people. Three months was a day to them, and what did they do with their time? So much of it, and such a constricted existence. What had Tyson once told her? The average citizen of Earth averages less than one off-world trip in eighty years, and the trends were toward less traveling. Spaceflight was safe only to a degree, and these people couldn't stand the idea of being meters away from a cold, raw vacuum.

"Cowards," Tyson had called them. "Gutted, deblooded cowards!"

Looking about, she saw the delicate twists of green leaves vanishing into grinning mouths, the chewing prolonged and indifferent. Except for Opera, that is. Opera saw her and smiled back in turn, his eyes different, something mocking about the tilt of his head and the curl of his mouth.

She found her eyes returning to Opera every little while, and she wasn't sure why. She felt no physical attraction for the man. His youth and attitudes made him different from the others, but how much different? Then she noticed his dinner — cultured potatoes with meaty hearts — and that made an impression on Pico. It was a standard food on board the *Kyber*. Opera was making a gesture, perhaps. Nobody else was eating that bland food, and she decided this was a show of solidarity. At least the man was trying, wasn't he? More than the others, he was. He was.

Dessert was cold and sweet and shot full of some odd liquor.

Pico watched the others drinking and talking among themselves. For the first time, she noticed how they seemed subdivided — discrete groups formed, and boundaries between each one. A dozen people here, seven back there, and sometimes individuals sitting alone — like Opera — chatting politely or appearing entirely friendless.

One lonesome woman rose to her feet and approached Pico, not smiling, and with a sharp voice, she declared, "Tomorrow, come morning . . . you'll live forever. . . .!"

Conversations diminished, then quit entirely.

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"Plugged in. Here." She was under the influence of some drug, the tip of her finger shaking and missing her own temple. "You fine lucky girl. . . . Yes, you are . . . !"

Some people laughed at the woman, suddenly and without shame.

The harsh sound made her turn and squint, and Pico watched her straightening her back. The woman was pretending to be above them and uninjured, her thin mouth squeezed shut and her nose tilting with mock pride. With a clear, soft voice, she said, "Fuck every one of you," and then laughed, turning toward Pico, acting as if they had just shared some glorious joke of their own.

"I would apologize for our behavior," said Opera, "but I can't. Not in good faith, I'm afraid."

Pico eyed the man. Dessert was finished; people stood about drinking, keeping the three-month-old party in motion. A few of them stripped naked and swam in the green pond. It was a raucous scene, tireless and full of happy scenes that never seemed convincingly joyous. Happy sounds by practice, rather. Centuries of practice, and the result was to make Pico feel sad and quite lonely.

"A silly, vain lot," Opera told her.

She said, "Perhaps," with a diplomatic tone, then saw several others approaching. At least they looked polite, she thought. Respectful. It was odd how a dose of respect glosses over so much. Particularly when the respect wasn't reciprocated, Pico feeling none toward them. . . .

A man asked to hear more stories. Please?

Pico shrugged her shoulders, then asked, "Of what?" Every request brought her a momentary sense of claustrophobia, her memories threatening to crush her. "Maybe you're interested in a specific world?"

Opera responded, saying, "Blueblue!"

Blueblue was a giant gaseous world circling a bluish sun. Her first thought was of Midge vanishing into the dark storm on its southern hemisphere, searching for the source of the carbon monoxide upflow that effectively gave breath to half the world. Most of Blueblue was calm in comparison. Thick winds; strong sunlight. Its largest organisms would dwarf most cities, their bodies balloonlike and their lives spent feeding on sunlight and hydrocarbons, utilizing carbon monoxide and other radicals in their patient metabolisms. Pico and the others had spent several months

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living on the living clouds, walking across them, taking samples and studying the assortment of parasites and symbionts that grew in their flesh.

She told about sunrise on Blueblue, remembering its colors and its astounding speed. Suddenly she found herself taking about a particular morning when the landing party was jostled out of sleep by an apparent quake. Their little huts had been strapped down and secured, but they found themselves tilting fast. Their cloud was colliding with a neighboring cloud — something they had never seen — and of course there was a rush to load their shuttle and leave. If it came to that.

"Normally, you see, the clouds avoid each other," Pico told her little audience. "At first, we thought the creatures were fighting, judging by their roaring and the hard shoving. They make sounds by forcing air through pores and throats and anuses. It was a strange show. Deafening. The collision point was maybe a third of a kilometer from camp, our whole world rolling over while the sun kept rising, its bright, hot light cutting through the organic haze —"

"Gorgeous," someone said.

A companion said, "Quiet!"

Then Opera touched Pico on the arm, saying, "Go on. Don't pay any attention to them."

The others glanced at Opera, hearing something in his voice, and their backs stiffening reflexively.

And then Pico was speaking again, finishing her story. Tyson was the first one of them to understand, who somehow made the right guess and began laughing, not saying a word. By then everyone was on board the shuttle, ready to fly; the tilting stopped suddenly, the air filling with countless little blue balloons. Each was the size of a toy balloon, she told. Their cloud was bleeding them from new pores, and the other cloud responded with a thick gray fog of butterflylike somethings. The somethings flew after the balloons, and Tyson laughed harder, his face contorted and the laugh finally shattering into a string of gasping coughs.

"Don't you see?" he asked the others. "Look! The clouds are enjoying a morning screw!"

Pico imitated Tyson's voice, regurgitating the words and enthusiasm. Then she was laughing for herself, scarcely noticing how the others giggled politely. No more. Only Opera was enjoying her story, again touching her

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arm and saying, "That's lovely. Perfect. God, precious . . . !"

The rest began to drift away, not quite excusing themselves.

What was wrong?

"Don't mind them," Opera cautioned. "They're members of some new chastity faith. Clarity through horniness, and all that." He laughed at them now. "They probably went to too many orgies, and this is how they're coping with their guilt. That's all."

Pico shut her eyes, remembering the scene on Blueblue for herself. She didn't want to relinquish it.

"Screwing clouds," Opera was saying. "That is lovely."

And she thought:

He sounds a little like Tyson. In places. In ways.

AFTER A while, Pico admitted. "I can't remember your father's face. I'm sure I must have met him, but I don't —"

"You did meet him," Opera replied. "He left a recording of it in his journal — a brief meeting — and I made a point of studying everything about the mission and you. His journal entries; your reports. Actually, I'm the best-prepared person here today. Other than you, of course."

She said nothing, considering those words.

They were walking now, making their way down to the pond, and sometimes Pico noticed the hard glances of the others. Did they approve of Opera? Did it anger them, watching him monopolizing her time? Yet she didn't want to be with *them*, the truth told. Fuck them, she thought; and she smiled at her private profanity.

The pond was empty of swimmers now. There were just a few sleepless ducks and the roiled water. A lot of the celebrants had vanished, Pico realized. To where? She asked Opera, and he said:

"It's late. But then again, most people sleep ten or twelve hours every night."

"That much?"

He nodded. "Enhanced dreams are popular lately. And the oldest people sometimes exceed fifteen hours —"

"Always?"

He shrugged and offered a smile.

"What a waste!"

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"Of time?" he countered.

Immortals can waste many things, she realized. But never time. And with that thought, she looked straight at her companion, asking him, "What happened to your father?"

"How did he die, you mean?"

A little nod. A respectful expression, she hoped. But curious.

Opera said, "He used an extremely toxic poison, self-induced." He gave a vague disapproving look directed at nobody. "A suicide at the end of a prolonged depression. He made certain that his mind was ruined before autodocs and his own robots could save him."

"I'm sorry."

"Yet I can't afford to feel sorry," he responded. "You see, I was born according to the terms of his will. I'm 99 percent his clone, the rest of my genes tailored according to his desires. If he hadn't murdered himself, I wouldn't exist. Nor would I have inherited his money." He shrugged, saying, "Parents," with a measured scorn. "They have such power over you, like it or not."

She didn't know how to respond.

"Listen to us. All of this death talk, and doesn't it seem out of place?" Opera said, "After all, we're here to celebrate your return home. Your successes. Your gifts. And you . . . you on the brink of being magnified many times over." He paused before saying, "By this time tomorrow, you'll reside inside all of us, making everyone richer as a consequence."

The young man had an odd way of phrasing his statements, the entire speech either earnest or satirical. She couldn't tell which. Or if there was a *which*. Maybe it was her ignorance with the audible clues, the unknown trappings of this culture. . . . Then something else occurred to her.

"What do you mean? 'Death talk. . . . '"

"Your friend Tyson died on Coldtear," he replied. "And didn't you lose another on Blueblue?"

"Midge. Yes."

He nodded gravely, glancing down at Pico's legs. "We can sit. I'm sorry; I should have noticed you were getting tired."

They sat side by side on the grass, watching the mallard ducks. Males and females had the same vivid green heads. Beautiful, she mentioned. Opera explained how females were once brown and quite drab, but people thought that was a shame, and voted to have the species altered, both sexes

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made equally resplendent. Pico nodded, only halfway listening. She couldn't get Tyson and her other dead friends out of her mind. Particularly Tyson. She had been angry with him for a long time, and even now her anger wasn't finished. Her confusion and general tiredness made it worse. Why had he done it? In life the man had had a way of dominating every meeting, every little gathering. He had been optimistic and fearless, the last sort of person to do such an awful thing. Suicide. The others had heard it was an accident — Pico had held to her lie — but she and they were in agreement about one fact. When Tyson died, at that precise instant, some essential heart of their mission had been lost.

Why? she wondered. Why?

Midge had flown into the storm on Blueblue, seeking adventure and important scientific answers; and her death was sad, yes, and everyone had missed her. But it wasn't like Tyson's death. It felt honorable, maybe even perfect. They had a duty to fulfill in the wilderness, and that duty was in their blood and their training. People spoke about Midge for years, acting as if she were still alive. As if she were still flying the shuttle into the storm's vortex.

But Tyson was different.

Maybe everyone knew the truth about his death. Sometimes it seemed that, in Pico's eyes, the crew could see what had really happened, and they'd hear it between her practiced lines. They weren't fooled.

Meanwhile, others died in the throes of life.

Uoo — a slender wisp of a compilation — was incinerated by a giant bolt of lightning on Miriam II, little left but ashes, and the rest of the party continuing its descent into the superheated Bottoms and the quiet Lead Sea.

Opaltu died in the mouth of a nameless predator. He had been another of Pico's lovers, a proud man and the best example of vanity that she had known — until today, she thought — and she and the others had laughed at the justice that befell Opaltu's killer. Unable to digest alien meats, the predator had sickened and died in a slow, agonizing fashion, vomiting up its insides as it staggered through the yellow jungle.

Boo was killed while working outside the *Kyber*, struck by a mote of interstellar debris.

Xon's lifesuit failed, suffocating her.

As did Kyties's suit, and that wasn't long ago. Just a year now, ship time,

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and she remembered a cascade of jokes and his endless good humor. The most decent person on board the *Kyber*.

Yet it was Tyson who dominated her memories of the dead. It was the man as well as his self-induced extinction, and the anger within her swelled all at once. Suddenly even simple breathing was work. Pico found herself sweating, then blinking away the salt in her eyes. Once, then again, she coughed into a fist; then finally she had the energy to ask, "Why did he do it?"

"Who? My father?"

"Depression is . . . should be . . . a curable ailment. We had drugs and therapies on board that could erase it."

"But it was more than depression. It was something that attacks the very old people. A kind of giant boredom, if you will."

She wasn't surprised. Nodding as if she'd expected that reply, she told him, "I can understand that, considering your lives." Then she thought how Tyson hadn't been depressed or bored. How could he have been either?

Opera touched her bad leg, for just a moment. "You must wonder how it will be," he mentioned. "Tomorrow, I mean."

She shivered, aware of the fear returning. Closing her burning eyes, she saw Tyson's walk through the bacterial mat, the loose gray chunks spinning as the currents carried them, lending them a greater sort of life with the motion. . . . And she opened her eyes, Opera watching, saying something to her with his expression, and her unable to decipher any meanings.

"Maybe I should go to bed, too," she allowed.

The park under the tent was nearly empty now. Where had the others gone?

Opera said, "Of course," as if expecting it. He rose and offered his hand, and she surprised herself by taking the hand with both of hers. Then he said, "If you like, I can show you your quarters."

She nodded, saying nothing.

It was a long, painful walk, and Pico honestly considered asking for a robot's help. For anyone's. Even a cane would have been a blessing, her hip never having felt so bad. Earth's gravity and the general stress were making it worse, most likely. She told herself that at least it was a pleasant night, warm and calm and perfectly clear, and the soft ground beneath the grass seemed to be calling to her, inviting her to lay down and sleep in the open.

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People were staying in a chain of old houses subdivided into apartments, luxurious yet small. Pico's apartment was on the ground floor, Opera happy to show her through the rooms. For an instant, she considered asking him to stay the night. Indeed, she sensed that he was delaying, hoping for some sort of invitation. But she heard herself saying, "Rest well, and thank you," and her companion smiled and left without comment, vanishing through the crystal front door and leaving her completely alone.

For a little while, she sat on her bed, doing nothing. Not even thinking, at least in any conscious fashion.

Then she realized something, no warning given; and aloud, in a voice almost too soft for even her to hear, she said, "He didn't know. Didn't have an idea, the shit." Tyson. She was thinking about the fiery man and his boast about being the second generation of star explorers. What if it was all true? His parents had injected a portion of a former Tyson into him, and he had already known the early worlds they had visited. He already knew the look of sunrises on the double desert world around Alpha Centauri A; he knew the smell of constant rot before they cracked their airlocks on Barnard's 2. But try as he might —

"— he couldn't remember how it feels to be disassembled." She spoke without sound. To herself. "That titanic and fearless creature, and he couldn't remember. Everything else, yes, but not that. And not knowing had to scare him. Nothing else did, but that terrified him. The only time in his life he was truly scared, and it took all his bluster to keep that secret —!"

Killing himself rather than face his fear.

Of course, she thought. Why not?

And he took Pico as his audience, knowing she'd be a good audience. Because they were lovers. Because he must have decided that he could convince her in his fearlessness one last time, leaving his legend secure. Immortal, in a sense.

That's what you were thinking . . .

. . . wasn't it?

And she shivered, holding both legs close to her mouth, and feeling the warm misery of her doomed hip.

She sat for a couple more hours, neither sleeping nor feeling the slightest need for sleep. Finally she rose and used the bathroom, and after a long,

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careful look through the windows, she ordered the door to open, and stepped outside, picking a reasonable direction and walking stiffly and quickly on the weakened leg.

Opera emerged from the shadows, startling her.

"If you want to escape," he whispered, "I can help. Let me help you, please."

The face was handsome in the moonlight, young in every fashion. He must have guessed her mood, she realized, and she didn't allow herself to become upset. Help was important, she reasoned. Even essential. She had to find her way across a vast and very strange alien world. "I want to get back into orbit," she told him, "and find another starship. We saw several. They looked almost ready to embark." Bigger than the *Kyber*, and obviously faster. No doubt designed to move even deeper into the endless wilderness.

"I'm not surprised," Opera told her. "And I understand."

She paused, staring at him before asking, "How did you guess?"

"Living forever inside our heads. . . . That's just a mess of metaphysical nonsense, isn't it? You know you'll die tomorrow. Bits of your brain will vanish inside us, made part of us, and not vice versa. I think it sounds like an awful way to die, certainly for someone like you —"

"Can you really help me?"

"This way," he told her. "Come on."

They walked for an age, crossing the paddock and finally reaching the wide tube where the skimmers shot past with a rush of air. Opera touched a simple control, then said, "It won't be long," and smiled at her. Just for a moment. "You know, I almost gave up on you. I thought I must have read you wrong. You didn't strike me as someone who'd go quietly to her death. . . ."

She had a vague, fleeting memory of the senior Opera. Gazing at the young face, she could recall a big, warm hand shaking her hand, and a similar voice saying, "It's very good to meet you, Pico. At last!"

"I bet one of the new starships will want you." The young Opera was telling her, "You're right. They're bigger ships, and they've got better facilities. Since they'll be gone even longer, they've been given the best possible medical equipment. That hip and your general body should respond to treatments —"

"I have experience," she whispered.

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"Pardon me?"

"Experience." She nodded with conviction. "I can offer a crew plenty of valuable experience."

"They'd be idiots not to take you."

A skimmer slowed and stopped before them. Opera made the windows opaque — "So nobody can see you" — and punched in their destination, Pico making herself comfortable.

"Here we go," he chuckled, and they accelerated away.

There was an excitement to all of this, an adventure like every other. Pico realized that she was scared, but in a good, familiar way. Life and death. Both possibilities seemed balanced on a very narrow fulcrum, and she found herself smiling, rubbing her hip with a slow hand.

They were moving fast, following Opera's instructions.

"A circuitous route," he explained. "We want to make our whereabouts less obvious. All right?"

"Fine."

"Are you comfortable?"

"Yes," she allowed. "Basically."

Then she was thinking about the others — the other survivors from the *Kyber* — wondering how many of them were having second or third thoughts. The long journey home had been spent in cold-sleep, but there had been intervals when two or three of them were awakened to do normal maintenance. Not once did anyone even joke about taking the ship elsewhere. Nobody had asked, "Why do we have to go to Earth?" The obvious question had eluded them, and at the time, she had assumed it was because there were no doubters. Besides herself, that is. The rest believed this would be the natural conclusion to full and satisfied lives; they were returning home to a new life and an appreciative audience. How could any sane compilation think otherwise?

Yet she found herself wondering.

Why no jokes?

If they hadn't had doubts, wouldn't they have made jokes?

Eight others had survived the mission. Yet none were as close to Pico as she had been to Tyson. They had saved each other's proverbial skin many times, and she did feel a sudden deep empathy for them, remembering how they had boarded nine separate shuttles after kisses and hugs and a few careful tears, each of them struggling with the proper things to say.

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But what could anyone say at such a moment? Particularly when you believed that your companions were of one mind, and, in some fashion, happy. . . .

Pico said, "I wonder about the others," and intended to leave it at that. To say nothing more.

"The others?"

"From the *Kyber*. My friends." She paused and swallowed, then said softly, "Maybe I could contact them."

"No," he responded.

She jerked her head, watching Opera's profile.

"That would make it easy to catch you." His voice was quite sensible and measured. "Besides," he added, "can't they make up their own minds? Like you have?"

She nodded, thinking that was reasonable. Sure.

He waited a long moment, then said, "Perhaps you'd like to talk about something else?"

"Like what?"

He eyed Pico, then broke into a wide smile. "If I'm not going to inherit a slice of your mind, leave me another story. Tell . . . I don't know. Tell me about your favorite single place. Not a world, but some favorite patch of ground on any world. If you could be anywhere now, where would it be? And with whom?

Pico felt the skimmer turning, following the tube. She didn't have to consider the question — her answer seemed obvious to her — but the pause was to collect herself, weighing how to begin and what to tell.

"In the mountains on Erindi 3," she said, "the air thins enough to be breathed safely, and it's really quite pretty. The scenery, I mean."

"I've seen holos of the place. It is lovely."

"Not just lovely." She was surprised by her authority, her self-assured voice telling him, "There's a strange sense of peace there. You don't get that from holos. Supposedly it's produced by the weather and the vegetation. . . . They make showers of negative ions, some say. . . . And it's the colors, too. A subtle interplay of shades and shadows. All very one-of-a-kind."

"Of course," he said carefully.

She shut her eyes, seeing the place with almost perfect clarity. A summer storm had swept overhead, charging the glorious atmosphere

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even further, leaving everyone in the party invigorated. She and Tyson, Midge, and several others had decided to swim in a deep-blue pool near their campsite. The terrain itself was rugged, black rocks erupting from the blue-green vegetation. The valley's little river poured into a gorge and the pool, and the people did the same. Tyson was first, naturally. He laughed and bounced in the icy water, screaming loud enough to make a flock of razor-bats take flight. This was only the third solar system they had visited, and they were still young in every sense. It seemed to them that every world would be this much fun.

She recalled — and described — diving feet first. She was last into the pool, having inherited a lot of caution from her parents. Tyson had teased her, calling her a coward and then worse, then showing where to aim. "Right here! It's deep here! Come on, coward! Take a chance!"

The water was startlingly cold, and there wasn't much of it beneath the shiny flowing surface. She struck and hit the packed sand below, and the impact made her groan, then shout. Tyson had lied, and she chased the bastard around the pool, screaming and finally clawing at his broad back until she'd driven him up the gorge walls, him laughing and once, losing strength with all the laughing, almost tumbling down on top of her.

She told Opera everything.

At first, it seemed like an accident. All her filters were off; she admitted everything without hesitation. Then she told herself that the man was saving her life and deserved the whole story. That's when she was describing the lovemaking between her and Tyson. That night. It was their first time, and maybe the best time. They did it on a bed of mosses, perched on the rim of the gorge, and she tried to paint a vivid word picture for her audience, including smells and the textures and the sight of the double moons overhead, colored a strange living pink and moving fast.

Their skimmer ride seemed to be taking a long time, she thought once she was finished. She mentioned this to Opera, and he nodded soberly. Otherwise, he made no comment.

I won't be disembodied tomorrow, she told herself.

Then she added, *Today, I mean today.*

She felt certain now. Secure. She was glad for this chance and for this dear new friend, and it was too bad she'd have to leave so quickly, escaping into the relative safety of space. Perhaps there were more people like Opera . . . people who would be kind to her, appreciating her circumstances and

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desires . . . supportive and interesting companions in their own right. . . .

And suddenly the skimmer was slowing, preparing to stop.

When Opera said, "Almost there," she felt completely at ease. Entirely calm. She shut her eyes and saw the raw, wild mountains on Erindi 3, storm clouds gathering and flashes of lightning piercing the howling winds. She summoned a different day, and saw Tyson standing against the storms, smiling, beckoning for her to climb up to him just as the first cold, fat raindrops smacked against her face.

The skimmer's hatch opened with a hiss.

Sunlight streamed inside, and she thought: *Dawn. By now, sure. . . .*

Opera rose and stepped outside, then held a hand out to Pico. She took it with both of hers and said, "Thank you," while rising, looking past him and seeing the paddock and the familiar faces, the green ground and the giant tent with its doorways opened now, various birds flying inside and out again . . . and Pico most surprised by how little she was surprised, Opera still holding her hands, and his flesh dry, the hand perfectly calm.

THE AUTODOCS stood waiting for orders.

This time, Pico had been carried from the skimmer, riding cradled in a robot's arms. She had taken just a few faltering steps before half-crumbling. Exhaustion was to blame. Not fear. At least it didn't feel like fear, she told herself. Everyone told her to take it easy, to enjoy her comfort; and now, finding herself flanked by autodocs, her exhaustion worsened. She thought she might die before the cutting began, too tired now to pump her own blood or fire her neurons or even breathe.

Opera was standing nearby, almost smiling, his pleasure serene and chilly and without regrets.

He hadn't said a word since they left the skimmer.

Several others told her to sit, offering her a padded seat with built-in channels to catch any flowing blood. Pico took an uneasy step toward the seat, then paused and straightened her back, saying, "I'm thirsty," softly, her words sounding thoroughly parched.

"Pardon?" they asked.

"I want to drink . . . some water, please . . . ?"

Faces turned, hunting for a cup and water.

It was Opera who said, "Will the pond do?" Then he came forward, extending an arm and telling everyone else, "It won't take long. Give us a

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moment, will you?".

Pico and Opera walked alone.

Last night's ducks were sleeping and lazily feeding. Pico looked at their metallic green heads, so lovely that she ached at seeing them, and she tried to miss nothing. She tried to concentrate so hard that time itself would compress, seconds turning to hours, and her life in that way prolonged.

Opera was speaking, asking her, "Do you want to hear why?"

She shook her head, not caring in the slightest.

"But you must be wondering why. I fool you into believing that I'm your ally, and I manipulate you —"

"Why?" she sputtered. "So tell me."

"Because," he allowed, "it helps the process. It helps your integration into us. I gave you a chance for doubts and helped you think you were fleeing, convinced you that you'd be free . . . and now you're angry and scared and intensely alive. It's that intensity that we want. It makes the neurological grafts take hold. It's a trick that we learned since the *Kyber* left Earth. Some compilations tried to escape, and when they were caught and finally incorporated along with their anger —"

"Except, I'm not angry," she lied, gazing at his self-satisfied grin.

"A nervous system in flux," he said. "I volunteered, by the way."

She thought of hitting him. Could she kill him somehow?

But instead, she turned and asked, "Why this way? Why not just let me slip away, then catch me at the spaceport?"

"You were going to drink," he reminded her. "Drink."

She knelt despite her hip's pain, knees sinking into the muddy bank and her lips pursing, taking in a long, warmish thread of muddy water, and then her face lifting, the water spilling across her chin and chest, and her mouth unable to close tight.

"Nothing angers," he said, "like the betrayal of someone you trust."

True enough, she thought. Suddenly she could see Tyson leaving her alone on the ocean floor, his private fears too much, and his answer being to kill himself while dressed up in apparent bravery. A kind of betrayal, wasn't that? To both of them, and it still hurt. . . .

"Are you still thirsty?" asked Opera.

"Yes," she whispered.

"Then drink. Go on."

She knelt again, taking a bulging mouthful and swirling it with her

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tongue. Yet she couldn't make herself swallow, and after a moment, it began leaking out from her lips and down her front again. Making a mess, she realized. Muddy, warm, ugly water, and she couldn't remember how it felt to be thirsty. Such a little thing, and ordinary, and she couldn't remember it.

"Come on, then," said Opera.

She looked at him.

He took her arm and began lifting her, a small, smiling voice saying, "You've done very well, Pico. You have. The truth is that everyone is very proud of you."

She was on her feet again and walking, not sure when she had begun moving her legs. She wanted to poison her thoughts with her hatred of these awful people, and for a little while, she could think of nothing else. She would make her mind bilious and cancerous, poisoning all of these bastards and finally destroying them. That's what she would do, she promised herself. Except, suddenly she was sitting on the padded chair, autodocs coming close with their bright, humming limbs; and there was so much stored in her mind — worlds and people, emotions heaped on emotions — and she didn't have the time she would need to poison herself.

Which proved something, she realized.

Sitting still now.

Sitting still and silent. At ease. Her front drenched and stained brown, but her open eyes calm and dry.

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June is the month for brides, and most wedding plans center around the white dress, the number of flowers and the five-tiered wedding cake. Few people talk about the years of hard work that make a marriage: the ups, the downs, and the warmth, the love, and the loss. "Good Wishes" examines the pre-marriage jitters from a post-marriage perspective.

Good Wishes

By Kristine Kathryn Rusch

FINALLY ANN has started packing the reminders away. She sits in the sunlight filtering in through the three large windows, memories scattered around her like children. The thick carpet is warm, the house quiet. And hers. All hers.

His clothing smells like him: pipe smoke and that distinctive personal scent. For months after his death, she would sit in his chair wrapped in his favorite sweater until it smelled more like her than anything else. She missed his company, his booming voice, his constant disruptions. Then the missing faded, replaced by a general loneliness, until now, now she thinks she can face what lay behind her.

She has separated his belongings into piles — family keepsakes, her keepsakes, and garbage. Her children will do this for her, and their memories will be different. Instead of the layered experiences of forty

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years together, they will find mementos of a life they never fully understood. She stored her mother's possessions — found and read love letters she never knew existed, saw pictures of a young couple she recognized only in her children's faces, and found cracked and broken things that meant nothing to her, but had meant enough to her mother to save.

The afternoon sun is hot, and sweat runs down her cheek. She wipes the droplet off, leaving (she imagines) a little smudge of dust. But she doesn't care. There is no one to see, no one to make fun, no one to query about how she spent her day. She moves the boxes aside, pleased she has gotten through most of his closet without crying.

Then she finds the wedding box.

Its very existence makes her heart stop, like it stopped all during the fall while she wrapped herself in his sweater. How did it get —? Then she remembers: the hot afternoon sun, much like this one; and the woman's voice on the phone, whining, *He says he loves me*; and the rage, the absolute killing rage that made her bang down the phone and call him into the bedroom like a teacher reprimanding a student.

When he left, an hour later, tear streaks on his cheeks as well as hers, promises echoing in the room, reassurances failing *(Do you think she would have attacked you if she felt she had a chance!)*, she hauled the wedding box out of her closet, where she had stored it like a cherished hope, and dragged the box into his study — burying it, never to think of it again.

Until now.

Two days earlier, her granddaughter, Kathryn Ann, had stopped at the house. She loved Kathryn Ann's visits, loved Kathryn Ann, with her bounce and fire and drive. Kathryn Ann had opened the front door herself, cried, "Gram?" with as much booming power as her grandfather used to have.

Ann came out of the kitchen, wiping her hands on a wet towel. She had just finished a meal her husband would have hated, a tofu casserole complete with walnuts and dates. For the past month, she had been cooking things she had never had before, and discovering that she liked them more than she liked the meals she had been cooking since she married.

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"Gram?" Kathryn Ann's eyes were shining, her cheeks flushed. "Got news!"

She took off her coat and flung it onto her grandfather's favorite chair. Ann set the towel down, smiling at her granddaughter's exuberance, wondering if she had ever felt such energy and joy.

"You look too excited to sit," Ann said, "so just tell me."

"Jeff asked me to marry him."

"And?"

"I said yes, silly!"

Ann froze, suddenly standing outside the joy. "What about school?"

"I'm almost done. We got it all worked out. We love each other, Gram!"

Ann stammered, trying to say something grandmotherly, like *I know you do, honey*, but the words wouldn't emerge. Instead, tears flooded her, and she shocked herself by uttering a small sob.

Instantly, Kathryn Ann's arms were around her, and she was embraced by the lemony warmth of the young woman she had cradled as a baby. "Oh Gram," Kathryn Ann said, "it's O.K. I'm sure Gramps already knows and is smiling for me."

Ann nodded, wishing the tears would stop, wishing she could explain that her granddaughter had misunderstood.

Kathryn Ann leaned back, wiped the tears from her grandmother's face. "And we'll be happy; you'll see. We'll be just as happy as you and Gramps were."

Ann swallowed, unable to stanch the words, hoping they sounded cheerful, unlike the way she meant them. "Oh honey," she said. "I hope you'll be happier."

So perhaps (she thinks) something else brought her to this room, a desire to recapture the happiness she had felt at the same age as Kathryn Ann. A man loved her. All was right with the world. Her destiny fulfilled, at the age of twenty-one.

She smiles a little, and her hand shakes as she reaches for the box. Its cardboard sides are cool, its memories ripe, ready for her to pluck. She pulls the flaps, and hears the cardboard shush as it rubs against itself. The box opens with the scent of candles and roses. She sticks her hand inside, without looking, wanting instead to be surprised at what she finds.

Her fingers close on a fabric-wrapped book. She pulls it out, smiles. Her

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friend Flossie (whatever happened to her?) gave them that book filled with photographs and cards. Ann opens it, looks at the first picture, sees herself too young, clinging to the arm of a man, also too young: their first date.

She closes the book. These aren't the kind of memories she wants. She wants to feel what happened to her, not judge it like an indulgent parent. She pulls the box closer. Its weight surprises her. She glances inside, sees the dried bouquet (roses and carnations), the guest book, the invitations, the napkins, and the champagne glasses. Off in a corner rests another box: smaller, with faded red sides. A gift box.

She leans back on the balls of her feet. This is why she opened the box, why she hid it away in the first place. The wedding present her husband never saw, because it was given to her and her alone. She pulls out the box and opens it.

The tissue paper falls around her jean-clad legs. She takes out a small globe, hundreds of sapphirelike crystals winking inside. At the top a faint ridge gleams. If she holds the ridge, the parts will separate, and she can hold the sapphires. The old woman's words are as clear as if she had just spoken them: *You can make any wish you want. Change anything you want. This is my charge to you: when things get bad, use this globe and make things right.*

Ann had pulled the globe out after that huge fight, and stared at it for a long time, finally deciding she no longer believed in such stuff and nonsense. Then she had put the globe away, put the wedding box away, and forced herself to forget.

She clutches the globe tighter. If she were to use it now, what changes would she make? Bring her husband back? No point. She has survived his death, survived the change. She isn't sure she wants to see him again. Make herself rich? She has everything she ever wanted.

Except youth. Except the opportunities for her own life, opportunities that Kathryn Ann is throwing away.

If Ann had never married, she might have gone on in her job at the department store. She had wanted to be a buyer — she was attractive enough, and liked clothing enough, and she had been in line for the position. But her husband ordered her not to work, and after he had torn up her payroll check ten times, she finally listened.

She opens the globe, takes out a sapphire crystal. It is warm against her

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palm. If she wishes never to have married, will she remember this life? Or will she appear in a different life, with a different home and different memories? In her nervousness, she squeezes the crystal, feels the burst of extra warmth, the tingle of uncertainty running through her arm.

You have to know what you want. the old woman had said, but Ann doesn't know, and she is spiraling, spiraling into a power she never realized existed.

And stops, globe still crushed against her heart, on a familiar street, on a hot summer morning, just after a thundershower has cleared the tension from the air. Everything smells like a fresh rain. The cars, forty years older, are bigger than she remembers; the house, smaller. She stands at the sidewalk, looking up into the bedroom window where her younger self prepares for what was billed as the most important day of her life.

She stands below and remembers . . .

. . . her mother's curling iron hot against her fingers. Ann put the curling iron down and peered into the mirror's wavy glass. No magic had happened overnight. She didn't become beautiful just because she was getting married.

Married. She hugged herself. Her slip's satin softness felt alien. She looked at the white dress sprawled across her bed, the high-heeled shoes that had cost her one week's pay, and the veil that would cover her face until Scott kissed her.

Married. She could back out now. Her father would be angry, but she would be free. She could continue her life —

— and die old and unloved in a hospital somewhere. Scott loved her, and she loved him. Everything would work as long as they loved each other.

The knock on her door made her start. She thought her parents had gone on last-minute errands. "Come in," she said.

An old woman stood there — an old, poor woman dressed in dungarees and a white cotton shirt. She held a globe in her hands.

"Who're you?" Ann asked.

"I came to give you a wedding present, Ann," the old woman said. She set the globe down. "A bowl of good wishes. Marriage is more than hearts and flowers and a pretty wedding. Marriage is until death. People change, and love dies —"

"Who are you?" Ann repeated, her heart pounding against her chest. If

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the woman came any closer, she would scream.

"But here you have the power to make things turn out right. You have to know what you want, but once you do, you can make any wish you want. Change anything you want. This is my charge to you: when things get bad, use this globe and make things right." The old woman smiled. "And remember. Being a wife isn't everything. You will always be yourself."

She backed out the door, closing it behind her. Ann ran across the room, yanking the door open, but the woman was already gone. Ann peered out the hall window and saw no one.

She went back into her room and touched the globe. Its glass was warm, and hundreds of sapphire crystals winked inside. She ran her hand along its surface, feeling the ridge where the lid attached to the base.

"We love each other," she said defensively, as if the old woman were still beside her. "And we always will."

ANN CLUTCHES the globe and stares at the old, beloved house, the one she sold after her parents died. She understands now what happened, and smiles at her younger self. Old woman indeed. What would the girl think if she knew that the old woman would someday face her in the mirror every morning?

She strokes the globe, remembers the anger she felt that morning, the anger she felt every time she held it. She thought she would never have to change anything. And she never did. She stayed, for better or for worse, for richer or for poorer, till death. . . .

And she remembers Scott — really remembers Scott — his face glowing as he watched her walk down the aisle, the wonder in his eyes as he held their newborn daughter, the pride as he played with his young granddaughter. The nights they giggled in their bed like teenagers long after their own teenagers were asleep. Yes, he had hurt her, and yes, he had made poor demands. But so had she.

Refusing to move when he had received the better-paying post back East. Freezing him out of their bed when he came home an hour late. Denying him time alone with his friends.

Choices they had both made. Choices they had shared.

He held her hand three days before he died, when he could still talk, and whispered, "Annie, I've always loved you."

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She is squeezing the globe so hard she's afraid it will break. "Scotty," she whispers, "I love you, too."

A neighbor (she can't remember his name) opens the door, stares at her. She has to make a choice now. If she doesn't go into that room, will her younger self have the faith, have the anger, to make it through all those difficult years? She never forgot the old woman, never forgot those awful (as she had thought then) words that the old woman had spoken on Ann's wedding day.

If she had to do it all over again, would she?

She slowly walks along the tree-lined path in a world she has half-forgotten, and into the house of her childhood.

As she closes the door on her younger self, she uses the sapphire to return to her own home, forty years in the future. The room spirals, then fades in: Scott's trophies decorating the bookshelves, his clothes spread on the floor. She is still clutching the globe.

For a minute she wonders at this, and then understands. The only way she can have the magic is to give it to herself. And she has given it. She feels more at peace than she ever has.

She reaches inside the wedding box and pulls out some yellowed wrapping paper. Its design is forty years out-of-date, but it crinkles and smells of roses. She takes scissors and tape from her desk, then kneels again. Deftly, with the agility of a woman who has wrapped gifts all her life, she wraps the globe and its box in the ancient paper. Then she pulls out a gift tag — miraculously unsigned — and writes:

For Kathryn Ann:
A hundred good wishes for your marriage.

She will hand the package to Kathryn Ann the next time she is over, and explain that love is not everything. That love always ends in parting, whether that parting is death or divorce, and the key is to make the most of the time together.

The key is to remain true to yourself.

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Sarah Smith is the author of The Vanished Child *(published in hardcover by Ballantine in 1992), a mystery novel named as a* New York Times *Notable Book of the Year. She is also a co-author of* Future Boston, *which will appear from Tor later this summer.* Future Boston *is a collaborative novel written with Geoffrey A. Landis, Alexander Jablokov, Steven Popkes, D. Alexander Smith and several others. Her short fiction has appeared in* Aboriginal SF *and the vampire anthology,* Shudder Again, *edited by Michele Slung (Roc, 1993) The inspiration for "Touched by the Bomb" came from the three years Sarah spent in Japan as a child. "My child-care person, Yaeko Ozawa," was a survivor of Nagasaki — one of two people in her large family to survive," Sarah writes. "As a fairly direct result of that, I'm a Quaker and a pacifist."*

Touched by the Bomb

By Sarah Smith

LAST WEEK I BURIED MY only child. I may have asked his murderer to the funeral.

Eddie was burned to death on a highway outside Loring, on an icy road up north in Maine. But in Arlington, it was spring. The gun-salute crashing over my boy's grave shook cherry blossoms from the trees. Across the black soil, through the light fog, they drifted like a message from Akiko. I thought of Akiko and graves.

In the middle of the service, I saw her walking across the misty grass toward me. She was old and unexpectedly elegant, a Japanese matron in a black suit and pearls. In my good black bereaved-mother purse, I put my hand on Dad's old service pistol.

I'm crazy, I thought. Johnny Latimer was crazy. Akiko couldn't have done what he said she did.

But I stood by Eddie's grave, my hand in my purse where the gun was, and waited for her.

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Forty years ago, just after the Second World War, my family was stationed in Japan. The year I was six, my family took in a Japanese girl named Akiko, and I made up a horror story about her.

I was the only child. We lived in a house in what had been somebody's rice field, across from a graveyard. Dad was Air Force and spent most of his time in the city, where most of the fathers were doing rebuilding work; but American families with young kids lived out in the country, miles from Hiroshima.

The Air Force base where we went to school had its smells of chalk and linoleum and soap. The American car that drove us back and forth smelled like gas and upholstery cleaner, good solid Eisenhower-era American smells. But in the country, Japan was foreign, fantastic. Every morning I woke up to the soba man ringing his bicycle bell, calling "So-ba, soooo-ba," with the tin box of fresh tofu in water strapped to his handlebars; I loved the smell of tofu, like edible daffodils. In the spring, when the cherry blossoms fell, the clay roads gave off an earthy smell like bare feet. The misty cemetery by our house was cool and dark, crushed grass and memorial pillars under old willows.

But the new cemetery down the road was crowded and noisy, like a market, full of laundry soap and rice, shoyu and cooking oil, because people lived there.

Thousands of people had survived Hiroshima. In old family tombs shaped like stone houses, four feet long and three feet high — a space smaller than under a table, where even a small Japanese grownup couldn't lie down straight — whole families were living.

I was part of a gang, I suppose you'd call it, of mostly Japanese kids who hung around the cemeteries. We started by eating the rice and the little blood tangerines, the mikans, that were left as offerings on the graves, but we were kids and hungry, and pretty soon we started stealing from the families. We'd sweep down on an old lady cooking a tiny piece of fish over her coal hibachi and snatch it away from her, or overturn a rice pot and run away laughing with handfuls of the stiff glutinous stuff, hot enough to burn your palms and fingers; then, behind some memorial stele covered with Japanese writing, we'd stuff it into our mouths, giggling. And being a big strong American kid, I stole and ate more than anyone else. Our thin little Japanese friends licked their burnt palms until not a rice grain was left, and the old lady cried when we stole her fish.

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Our crime spree couldn't have lasted too long. I was caught with some caramels I had lifted from a stand in the village. Mom decided I needed to be watched—because she didn't want me to get sick. Rural Japan then was still very much a Third World country. The nauseatingly sweet-smelling honeybuckets went right from the privies to the vegetable fields; the sparrows came down and fed on the fields; and in the market, the roast sparrows and the unwashed vegetables and the fish from Hiroshima Bay all ended up on the same unwashed wooden stands together. At the American school, we American kids drank our cartons of milk and ate our peanut butter sandwiches on Wonder Bread imported from the States, while our mothers listened to lectures about hookworm. We were supposed to eat only things that came from the PX.

So Mother hired a Japanese girl to watch me, one of those who lived in the new cemetery.

There were three kinds of young women in Japan in those days. Rural girls still wore the kimono, covered their mouths when they laughed, and never talked to Westerners. Bargirls had red lipstick, curled hair and boyfriends. In between were the shy, pretty Japanese girls who had begun to go Western. Akiko was in the third group, whom the base mothers agreed was the only one worth bothering with. She wore a tiny nickel cross on a chain around her neck, a gift from the Catholic sisters who had taught her; she spoke halting, French-accented English. She wore Western clothes, modest neckhigh dresses or sweaters and skirts, but no fingernail polish on her clean square nails and almost no lipstick; this disappointed me, because at six I was fascinated by makeup. Mother approved, though.

"Akiko is a treasure," Mother said to one of her bridge friends. "Such a pretty girl, but she's not one of *that* kind." I didn't know what *that* kind meant, but Mother's half-whisper said it was something terrible.

In our family photos, Akiko looks sixteen and still a schoolgirl. I remember her as very large, standing protectively over me at the corner of some busy street, holding my hand before we crossed together. She took me everywhere. In a crowd at a festival, she held me up to see a gilded shrine bouncing by on the shoulders of chanting Shinto worshippers. In a street market, she bought me painted paper kites, wooden shuttlecocks with the faces of demons, and tin trains that ticked around sharp tin tracks. She made me endless paper dolls and we drew and colored and cut out clothes for them together: girl dolls and boys, paper families. At the playground by

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our American school, she stood in a crowd with all the other Japanese girls, her arms tucked into the wide floppy sleeves of the cloth coat Mother had given her, waiting for hour on hour while her American child played. She was eager to spoil me and I loved her for it.

But my Japanese friends were afraid of her.

My best friend from the cemetery, Tamiko, was one of a few lucky Japanese children who attended the American school. She knew no more English than I knew Japanese and sat in class hour after hour with her fingers folded, but it seemed somehow important to her parents that she was there, the same way it was important to my parents that Akiko wore her Western clothes and her Christian cross.

After school she and I would go outside and play jacks or swing, things that could be done without knowing each other's language. But whenever Akiko came over toward us, Tami retreated to the edge of the swing set or the sandbox until she left.

"Akiko hibak'sha," Tami said.

"Akiko's nice, she buys me toys. Come on —" I tugged my friend's arm, but she pulled back.

"Akiko hibak'sha." Tami looked at my Akiko like the other characters in *Dracula* looked at Bela Lugosi. As if she were a monster.

"What's hibakusha?" I asked my mother that evening. I liked the effect of bad words, and hoped it was one, or at least something scary, but didn't want to be blamed. I added hastily, "Tami called Akiko hibakusha."

"Don't you *ever* use that word, Annie dear, it's hurtful to Akiko."

"What does it mean?"

"It means," my mother hesitated, "someone who lived in the city."

"Tami lived in the city," I objected.

"Tami's family lived on the perimeter." My mother's voice took on the low strained tone she used for grown-up words like *cancer*. "Akiko-san's house was in the city center."

She hesitated and a moment later added, "It means touched by the bomb."

AKIKO'S FIRST victim was Johnny Latimer.

Johnny was one of the psychologists who descended on Hiroshima after the war, a tall, blond, straight-arrow Baptist from the plains of Iowa who'd come to help fix the greatest trauma the world had

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ever known. His job was studying trauma in survivors, and he loved his work. He did everything right, learned Japanese, really cared for his patients, and if he was just a little bit excited that Hiroshima had come along when Johnny Latimer was ready to write papers about trauma, he wasn't obvious about it.

Johnny fell hard for Akiko.

Every day he would wander by the playground and talk to her while she waited for us. Because he was easily a foot taller than she was, he'd have to bend down in a funny way so we children would laugh. Little dark-haired Akiko would smile up at tall blond Johnny, her hands tucked in the sleeves of my mother's cloth coat. Even I, six years old, could see how pretty she was then; she looked like a flower.

One night Akiko told me secretly that Johnny had applied to marry her under the War Brides Act. I started crying because Akiko was going to go away, and then she started crying too. We had to console ourselves by remembering that we would be together again in the United States (which I thought of as small, about the size of Shikoku or maybe even city-sized, since almost everyone at the base seemed to have known each other in the States). Akiko made my favorite paper doll a Shinto wedding costume out of real cloth, red and gold brocade pasted onto a paper backing. The two of us spent hours looking at the pictures in Japanese bride magazines.

The other Japanese girls who worked at the base drew away from Akiko when they knew she was going to be married. Even I saw it. Now she waited for me away from their chattering crowd at the playground. I asked my mother about it.

"Because she is — touched by the bomb — the other girls don't think she should marry or have any family. But don't talk about it, Annie dear."

One spring day not long after, Johnny took Akiko and me to the beach.

On our way we passed the city. From far away, behind the cherry blossom trees, we saw the acres of blackened rubble and the skeleton dome of the Industry Promotion Hall. Johnny drove blithely past on the new highway, teaching us to sing "Zip-a-dee-doo-dah," not mentioning the city outside our windows; something not for me, like eating Morinaga caramels, something not even to notice.

"Tell me about when you lived in the city, Akiko," I said.

Johnny said, "No, don't."

Akiko didn't sing or look at the cherry trees with all their pink

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blossoms, only stared out the window as we drove past the city.

We went to one of the long sandy dune beaches on the Inland Sea. It was a thundery day, the sky full of dark clouds and the light intense, lemony, and hot; Johnny's green Studebaker looked painted in neon. With my tin pail and shovel, I dug holes and looked for crabs under the rocks. Akiko played with me, and then Johnny asked Akiko to take a walk with him into the dunes. I kept playing at the edge of the tide.

After awhile I realized that, except for a Japanese family packing up their picnic some distance away, I was all alone on the beach.

I had an understanding, somehow, that I was to stay on the beach and not go into the dunes after Akiko and Johnny; but I followed them. The dunes were high and difficult to climb. I climbed the first ridge of dune and saw nothing, slid down into the hollow between them. My sweaty legs and feet were covered with blackish sand. The sand rose up out of the hollow in all directions, dark sand, not a blade of grass, only myself alone. Thirsty, I climbed and slid and climbed again, got to the top of yet another ridge, and saw them.

Below me, with their clothes off, Akiko and Johnny were on a blanket, fighting. I had never seen such grownup fury. They both seemed caught in their fight as though they had to do it. He was on top of her and he was really hurting her. She was under him, not struggling to get away, but her face was as pale and set as when we had been driving in the car past the city. There was sand in her pretty hair. His face was red, he yelled too as if she had hurt him and arched away from her, but she wrapped her legs around him to hold him, to keep him meshed in the misery of whatever they were doing. I saw her hand helpless on his shoulder, exactly the same short-fingered square-nailed hand that held mine in the street market. I lost my footing on the sand and slid backward, back out of sight of them, to the bottom of the dune, and I didn't dare climb up again. I sat crying silently at the bottom of the hill because my Akiko was unhappy and because I had liked Johnny.

I sat underneath the beach umbrella until they came back. The next day, Johnny's skin was as red and tender as my fingers had been when I had stolen hot rice. Mother called it sunburn but I knew better. It was something that had happened to him because of what I had seen on the dunes.

After their "fight," in my six-year-old wisdom, I wasn't surprised when they didn't get married; but it was for a sad reason. Johnny's sister in the

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United States got polio and he had to go home. He was supposed to come back when his sister was better, but he wrote that she died. Then he wrote that both his mother and his father were sick. Finally he didn't write at all.

Akiko put her bride magazines away.

I saw that pale, set expression on Akiko's face again when she looked at Lizard Doyle; and that was when I began to make up my horror story.

Lizard Doyle was a half-bald man whom nobody liked. He had a nice wife and two nice daughters, who went home for a visit not long after Johnny went back to the States; and as soon as they were gone, Major Doyle went after Akiko.

He was an important man on the base, and usually he didn't spend time on the playground even when his daughters were playing there. But for a week or so he stayed at the playground for a few minutes at a time, talking to Akiko; and then Akiko wouldn't be there for an hour or more. I had to continue playing on the swings and in the sandbox, pretending that she was there waiting for me to go home. After an hour or so, Akiko would come back with that look on her face, that same quiet, set, expressionless look.

In July, as Mrs. Doyle and her two nice daughters were coming back to Hiroshima, their plane crashed in the Philippine Sea, and Lizard Doyle didn't even have their bodies to take home.

I was six, just discovering Nancy Drew, and I liked mystery in real life the way I liked fingernail polish, for decoration. I'd only known two people whose family members had died, and they were both connected with Akiko. Even I knew better than to tell adults about this, but I decided, just the way that Akiko had bought me kites and made me paper dolls, she was now providing me with a real Nancy Drew mystery of my own.

I wondered how soon she'd kill again.

For her third victim she chose a man named Royce Sentry, and it was a real scandal on base because he'd been involved in the making of the bomb. Even Mother couldn't understand why Akiko would get involved with a man from the Los Alamos project.

Royce Sentry was a short, funny, coyboy-looking engineer who wore a big turquoise belt buckle and was always joking about how big his slide rule was. I took a great interest in Royce Sentry. I wanted to know whether he had any little girls or boys, how many brothers and sisters he had, and

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where his parents lived. He had a huge family on a farm in Illinois. Pleased, I sat back and waited for something bad to happen.

I waited all the time that Royce Sentry applied for marriage with Akiko under the War Brides Act, all the time that Akiko happily looked through bride magazines and had her white Christian gown and her red Shinto kimono made, and every day before their marriage. Even the day of their Christian wedding, when the base commander escorted Akiko down the aisle and gave her away to Royce, I expected some last-minute horrible news.

Nothing happened at all, and they went off to the States.

THAT WAS forty years ago.

My family went home to the States too. I grew up, got married out of high school, got a messy divorce that I've never regretted, and raised my boy alone. I have a legal secretary business and Eddie and I did all right.

I never saw Hiroshima. I never have seen it, never even any of those documentaries. I heard things, *burned steel, human shadows*, but it never sounded like the part of Japan I knew in my childhood and I never wanted to be an expert. Hiroshima wasn't even the worst bombing in Japan — that was Yokohama, conventional — but because of the reaction people who've never been there had to the name of the city, I used to tell people we lived near Nagoya.

Eddie went into the Air Force like his dad and mine, and this May he would have got married to a nice girl named Rebecca Robinson. Saturday night a week ago, he and Becky were driving down the highway and an eighteen-year-old kid with a sixpack of Bud and a rusty Ford pickup slammed into them and killed them both.

Tuesday afternoon, Johnny Latimer called me, and told me what he thought Akiko had been doing all these years. He knew about the Sentrys. "She's a monster," Johnny said. He gave me Royce Sentry's phone number, and hers.

I called her and asked her to the funeral.

"Come sit down on this bench," I said to Akiko when the service was over, and we both sat down by the edge of the walkway, fifty feet or so from where a man with a little yellow cemetery backhoe was waiting to fill Eddie's grave. I had my hand inside my good black leather purse. I must

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have looked as though I was about to reach for my handkerchief.

"I am so sorry," Akiko said. She still had her trace of French accent. I took a good look at her: over sixty but still beautiful; her short, waved black hair was touched with gray. The black suit was linen and the pearls were real, big ones, with the fancy Mikimoto clasp. I wondered who had paid for them. She had the look of a woman who still dresses for men. She didn't have a wedding ring. I looked straight at her face and saw what I hadn't seen for forty years, the pale, set, expressionless face of Akiko who had stared out the window at Hiroshima.

I opened my purse and let her see inside, where my hand was resting on the rough sawcut grip of the old Air Force pistol.

And then I told her the story I had made up forty years before, the one I had remembered when Johnny spoke to me.

"I talked to Johnny Latimer last Tuesday," I said. "His sister died, then both his parents. He decided to marry a girl back home and then she died too. He thinks you did it all."

Her expression didn't change; she folded her hands in her lap. They were exactly the hands I remembered, short-fingered with clean square nails, the hands that had held mine crossing the street, the hands she had tucked into the wide cloth sleeves of Mother's coat. That made it harder.

"I phoned Royce Sentry in Illinois. He divorced you in 1957. By that time four of his brothers and sisters had died, three of their children. His last brother has got throat cancer now and Royce is the only other one of the family left alive.

"After the divorce, you married one of Royce's Project friends and you moved to California. Lizard Doyle saw you there — I called him too. Your new husband's family was dying off," I said.

She sat looking at the gun.

"Tell me it's just a story," I said. "Or do it to me too. I can't live without Eddie."

She was supposed to tell me I was crazy. She was supposed to be a monster and kill me. None of that happened. We two women sat on the bench, a middle-aged legal secretary from Connecticut and an elegant Japanese woman almost in old age.

"Why my boy?" I burst out. The way poor Johnny Latimer had yelled out at me, "Why'd she kill my *sister?*" Why'd it have to happen to me and mine? Eddie was an Eagle Scout, and for my birthday one year he made me a board

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mounted with fourteen different types of knots. "After he got sick one Saturday night in high school, he never drank more than one beer. He was just about to get married." He wasn't suppose to die. I wished he'd been a biker, spent every night in bars, and got some girl in trouble, rather than this. "He was innocent."

Akiko pressed her full lips together slightly, the way she had looked at the black rubble of Hiroshima. Across the field of white stones, the little yellow tractor waited to bury my boy, and finally I heard the grinding of its gears and the quiet scrape of its shovel.

"Did Dad do anything —? Some evening when Mom was at a bridge party and I was in bed?"

Akiko looked at me and let herself blink once, as if she had never thought it might be that simple. *"How innocent we are,"* she said. "As if death is kind and fair, like a responsible person."

She didn't look at the gun again, but sat beside me with her quiet, set face. She didn't try to convince me I was wrong or crazy from grief. She didn't ask me why I had called her, after forty years, and why I had brought a gun with me.

She sat there in the silence with me, in the white misty rows of graves, and let me ask *Why my boy,* as if Akiko who had held my hand across the street and provided me with a Nancy Drew mystery could still give me clues. If she had been a monster, like Johnny had thought, she would have given me an answer. But all she had was the expression on her face, which wasn't some glare like a monster that killed everyone her victims loved. I had seen the same face in my mirror after the police awakened me. My own face made me cry.

Can you control it? I wanted to ask her — as if a sixteen-year-old Japanese schoolgirl would know how to do anything to a soldier's people thousands of miles away. And it came to me she couldn't, she had loved Johnny and Royce the way she probably loved the man who'd paid for those pearls. The way, all that time ago, she loved me.

"Are you afraid?" I asked. I was afraid.

"Of being caught?" she asked, and for a moment her face was tired, an old woman's. "Of the bomb?"

I slipped my hand out of my purse and snapped the catch closed, holding it shut with my two closed fists.

"Tell me about Hiroshima," I said.

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And she told me about the countryside I remembered. She talked about Hinamatsuri dolls, the gilded Shinto shrines, the taste of rice and caramels. She took a snapshot out of her purse (it was a good black leather purse, like mine). All I could see was a picnic at a beach, gestures with blurred faces: a young mother holding up a baby, a boy making a face, a woman serving food, a man holding up a bottle of beer. He was in the uniform of the Imperial Japanese Army; he'd probably been back on leave after burning Philippine villages or chasing civilians through Burma. The reasons why Akiko's father should have died were as strong as the reasons why Eddie should have lived. She talked about fishing on Hiroshima Bay with her father and the soba-man's bicycle coming down her street in the early morning. I remembered.

"Thank you for coming," I told Akiko. "You've helped me."

We shook hands. I watched her walk away across the grass toward her black car.

I still don't know how she does it any more than she does. We don't have to know.

Tomorrow I'm going to see an eighteen-year-old-boy arraigned for drunk driving and manslaughter. His name is Terry Cogswell, a senior at Loring AFB high school. He never drank much except for that one night. He's a good athlete and had a scholarship to U of Maine next year. Probably, once he gets out of this, he'll still go to college, have a career, get married. He has five brothers and sisters. He has a girlfriend.

I don't hate him, I understand him, and that's good, because he reminds me a lot of Eddie, and of me. He's innocent.

Tomorrow, at the courthouse, I'm going to touch his arm or look into his eyes, nothing more than that, and I'm going to tell him one fact. I will be the one to tell him this fact, I will be responsible for this fact. It will come from me and from Akiko, from that family in the photograph, from Eddie and Becca, from the lost city of Hiroshima, from all of us, the victims and the monsters. There is no innocence. There is no safety. Some people may think so, but not you, never any more you.

You have been touched by the bomb.

Remember.

Live.

For the Ozawa family of Nagasaki
d. August 9, 1945
and for Ernest Hollings

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FILMS

KATHI MAIO

COLD TURKEY

THE IDEA that Small-is-Beautiful has been embraced by many a social scientist, but that little life-lesson has never gotten through to the guys who needed it the most: movie studio moguls. BIG is still the operative work in Tinseltown. When Hollywood wants to save money, they may hire a first-time director, or go north of the border for a scab shoot, but scaling down characters and storylines to human proportions? They "just don't get it." To today's studios, a good movie generally consists of a big-name star scuttling between colossal crashes, spectacular shoot-outs or other impressive special effects.

All that sizzle and flash come with a hefty price tag. But the costs are deemed necessary. Otherwise, moviegoers might notice the shocking lack of originality in the writing of the films we lay down seven bucks for.

I wish I could say that every badly written, monotonously formulaic script that has shamelessly mugged its elders and betters for a plot was written by a struggling, bargain-basement beginner. That is only partly true. Many of the fellows who write these movies are indeed quite young. Poor they ain't.

Don't get me wrong. I don't begrudge any writer a living wage. (I hope to make one myself, some day.) I just hate the thought that some of the best-paid writers in the world are worse than pedestrian. They are the kind of schoolboys who are too lazy to do their own work, so they copy off the papers of the diligent students around them.

Sadly, the above diatribe could apply to so many of today's movies, you may still be wondering what movie I am supposed to be reviewing. Ponder no further, gentle reader. Today's target is *Forever Young*.

The writer of *Forever Young* is the temporarily young screenwriter, Jeffrey Abrams. He has achieved great success in the last three of his 26 years. He started off with a script

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co-written with Jill Mazursky, 1990's extremely forgettable *Taking Care of Business*. The following year, his first solo script was released, directed by none other than Mike Nichols.

It was a domestic drama called *Regarding Henry*. And I thought at the time that the story was nothing more than a disease-of-the-week TV movie with delusions of big-screen profundity. In it, Harrison Ford plays a cold, cut-throat yuppy: a professional success, but a bad father and a worse husband. All that changes when he takes a bullet to the brain in a hold-up.

After his trauma, he is a new man. He plays with his kid, kisses his wife, and hugs cute beagle puppies. He goes from creep to warm-and-fuzzy sweetie-pie. And all it took was a good shot to the head. It was enough to make the unhappy wives of America contemplate the purchase of a handgun. But it wasn't enough, despite a sickeningly sincere performance by Mr. Ford, to make a movie worth watching.

Still, Mr. Abrams's stock was high. So, when he went to peddle his next script, entitled "The Rest of Daniel" at that time, he was able to "package" it with Mel Gibson already tied to it with a big bow. The deal was done. The movie was made. And this past Christmas season, it even did quite well at the box office.

Forever Young is a real success story. It's just not a very good movie. Mel's baby blues, and his requisite bare buns shot, are supposed to be enough to satisfy his audience. (He's never made my heart go pitter-pat, but I graciously concede his charms.) Even so, a film should have something more than star-power going for it; something genuine and original. And that is precisely what *Forever Young* completely lacks.

This romance/adventure/science fiction comedy-drama recycles every trick of the trade. But worse than that, many of the borrowed bits seem to be lifted out of other movies whole. Near the end, when he is being chased by G-men, Mel begins to resemble E.T. (Now there's a trick.) But in the film's early scenes, Gibson's hero, Daniel, bears an even more striking resemblance to Richard Dreyfuss's hero, Pete, in *Always* (1989). (Steven Spielberg, who made *Always*, was shamelessly recycling, too. But at least he honestly acknowledged that he was re-making 1943's *A Guy Named Joe*.)

Consider that both Pete and Daniel are daring pilots who can calmly and bravely crash-land a vintage plane, but who can't seem to commit to the women they adore. They are emotional wimps who strut around in bomber jackets. And death, or the next thing to it, separates them from their true loves

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before they get up enough courage to commit.

Peter dies and comes back as a ghost to resolve his romantic unfinished business. Daniel takes a slightly different approach when his sweetheart, Helen (Isabel Glasser) is run over by a Mack loaded with fresh citrus, and falls into (what's believed to be) an irreversible coma.

If Helen is dead to the world, that's good enough for Daniel. He talks his best buddy, a cryobiologist named Harry (George Wendt), into substituting him for a chicken in his next freezing experiment. Daniel seeks cold comfort for his broken heart.

Luckily, Harry (who thought he was years away from human experimentation) just happens to have a snazzy, souped-up chrome pressure cooler in readiness. Production designer Gregg Fonseca says he based his design on the Electrolux vacuum cleaner. It looks none too practical or cost-efficient, but it does gleam mightily like something out of a 40's science fiction flick. And Mel, after all, deserves the most elegant tank possible in which to take his big chill.

Daniel had planned to sleep off his grief for only a year or so. But he doesn't wake up for more than fifty years, when two mischievous boys, Nat (Elijah Wood) and Felix (Robert Hy Gorman) start playing with his capsule long forgotten in a military warehouse.

Those few of you who haven't seen *Forever Young*, might wonder why Daniel was left frozen for so long. Those of us who have seen the film wonder, instead, why he was ever thawed. This is one silly movie. And the most asinine aspect is Abrams's rationale for Daniel's long sleep.

We are told that everyone who knew about his frozen state died in a fire that nonetheless left Dan's gleaming capsule unscathed. (Unaccountably, although old Harry died in the fire, his many scientific notebooks also survived in mint condition. But for some reason, no one read them at the time. Or, if they did, they didn't want to bother snooping around in the rubble or adjoining lab for a massive metal chamber containing Harry's most daring experiment.)

Military scientists and their staffs are evidently an incredibly incurious lot. Not only did no one peek into Daniel's capsule back at the lab, at some point that space-age casket was moved to a warehouse. And, again, no one thought to take a look inside it until those mischievous lads broke in. Yet after fifty years of no maintenance — if no one knew what it was, it's a cinch no one replenished the liquid nitrogen or whatever — that snazzy capsule

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is still keeping Daniel in an optimum state of suspended animation, from which he is able to quickly *self*-revive.

If this were the only aspect of this movie ludicrous enough to pick to shreds, I'd be willing to forgive and forget. (Obviously, any movie that presents deep-freeze napping as a present-day reality requires the suspension of disbelief, as well as animation.) But there are plenty of other howlers: an untrained kid flying and landing a B-25 on a small patch of coastal scrub and sand is another of my favorites.

And about that kid landing a B-25. It demonstrates another peeve I have with *Forever Young*. As far-fetched as everything is in this movie, it is all *so bloody obvious*, as well. Daniel and the poor fatherless wee Nat bond together in several cutesy scenes. In one, they play pilot in an elaborate make-shift simulator Daniel has constructed out of trash and oddments in Nat's tree house. I sat there watching that scene and thought, "So the kid is going to fly a plane later, huh?"

"Huh?" was my response to much of this movie. It seems senseless to go on finding fault. So, let me try to say something nice. The performances are generally good. I found young Elijah Wood and Jamie Lee Curtis (as his plucky single-mom, Claire) especially appealing. The technical talents were also worth their no doubt sizeable salaries. I was especially impressed by the aging makeup designed by Dick Smith and Greg Cannom. Their artifice was more natural than anything else in *Forever Young*.

As a star-driven formula picture, I can see how it was possible to see this film and enjoy it. You just couldn't think about what you were watching. You had to concentrate on not noticing how patched-together (out of stolen parts) and preposterous the whole story was. And you had to overlook how shamelessly you were being manipulated.

Maybe you could. I couldn't. Not a movie this hackneyed, filled with the kind of fake sentiment that pushes your buttons, but never truly touches your emotions as a viewer. Not when I know of another movie, released only a year earlier, that told a very similar story 100 times better, and for a fraction of the costs. Getting the chance to recommend *that* movie to you is the only thing that makes reviewing *Forever Young* worthwhile.

That movie is *Late for Dinner*. And let me state this clearly: *Forever Young* isn't fit to mop up the melted icewater from this far superior cryonics tale, directed by W.D. Richter (*The Adventures of Buckaroo Bonzai*), and written by Mark Andrus.

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In 1963, Willie Husband (Brian Wimmer) was just an average Joe. He worked hard for the wife he loved and the little daughter he adored. And he looked out for his brother-in-law, the developmentally disabled Frank (Peter Berg), a sweet guy with bad kidneys. His was a happy, ordinary life until he hit a streak of bad luck.

When Willie loses his job as a milkman, he and the family face foreclosure on their small home. Turns out the man behind Willie's misfortune is an evil developer (Peter Gallagher), who cares much more about the shag and vinyl appointments of his office than he does his small son. And as for Willie and his family, he will happily destroy their lives as long as he gets their little patch of New Mexico for his monster housing project.

When Willie fights back, he and Frank end up on the run from the law. Willie is wounded, and poor Frank is frightened and confused. They make it as far as Pomona, California, where a stop for Milk Duds becomes a critical moment in both their lives.

A kindly Dr. Chilblains (Bo Brundin) offers to treat the unconscious Willie. And he makes another (clearly opportunistic) offer to naive Frank. How would he like to have a good night's sleep and find everything different when he wakes? The police would no longer be looking for him. And Frank's glomerular nephritis will no longer be a death sentence, Dr. Dan predicts, in a future time when a man will be able to walk into any hospital and order a new kidney.

Frank thinks it over as best he can and decides he can use the rest. And so, he and Willie become a cryonics experiment. Their "one good night" lasts almost thirty years, until a freak, catastrophic accident at the Chilblains lab brings them back to the world.

Much has changed between 1963 and 1991. *Late for Dinner* doesn't ignore future shock the way *Forever Young* does. Nor does it go into Rip Van Winkle overload. The price of a hamburger is a bit of a stunner, but I like the fact that not all the changes Willie and Frank perceive are negative ones. (Back in 1963, National Guardsmen were needed to desegregate some schools. In 1991, Frank is treated by an African American doctor who is compassionate, but more than skeptical of their experience. "Cryonics is a joke," he tells Willie.)

Willie couldn't agree more. Yet he realizes how cruel the joke may be. Desperate to get back to his family, he is nonetheless aware of what a barrier time can be. Willie and Frank are still the same, nice young guys in their twenties with a

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Kennedy-era mind-set. But their womenfolk have aged and changed with their tumultuous times.

Daughter, Jess (Colleen Flynn), is now a grown woman — older than her father — with a husband and kids of her own. And Joy Husband (the divine Marcia Gay Harden) has changed even more. The wrinkles and gray hair (of which there are, frankly, too few) are nothing compared to the emotional changes. On that fateful day when her husband and brother disappeared, Joy became a single-mom and family breadwinner. By necessity, she made a career for herself. She married and divorced another husband. She got on with her life.

I don't need to tell you any more about this movie except that it is a gentle, funny, romantic film that will prove to you why *Forever Young* is worthless trash. God bless videotape. It gives those low-budget, no-star treasures, like *Late for Dinner*, a second chance. Willie and Frank deserve no less.

And you, my friends, deserve no less than the best. Forget about *Forever Young*. Rush to rent (or buy) *Late for Dinner*. It will convince you that small is, indeed, beautiful.

Now, if those guys behind the studio gates would only get with the program.

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Mary Rosenblum's first novel, Drylands, *has just appeared from Del Rey. Her second,* Chimera, *will follow in November. In the last few years, she has become a popular writer of short fiction, with stories appearing in* Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, Pulphouse, *and various anthologies. "'Sanctuary,'" she writes, "is the result of my lifelong habit of taking evening walks. Darkness softens the scars and scabs of an aging neighborhood. It neatens the yards, hides the missing shutters and ragged shingles, and gives back to the battered old houses some of their former dignity. A lighted window provides a momentary glimpse of color and gracious warmth that will turn to dirt and peeling wallpaper with the morning sun. There is a drowsy peace in the air that makes me think of elderly women and men dreaming gently of youth and yesterday. ..."*

Sanctuary

By Mary Rosenblum

THE OLD house must have been something when it was new. Ian crouched in the overgrown yard, ears full of the traffic rush in the street beyond the rhododendron hedge. The house stood on an island of overgrown green, squeezed between two freeway ramps, shadowed by the overhead interstate. FOR SALE? Ian eyed the weathered sign.

Yeah, sure. In your dreams.

It must have been some rich dude's private place — columns, big porch — fancy. The porch was called a *porte cochère.* Ian remembered the name from Yvonne's books. A real mansion. Yvonne's mantelpiece might be here. She'd showed him pictures. Yeah, it might. This place looked solid —no busted windows or trash. Ian edged into the dew-soaked jungle of the yard. A rosebush snagged his sleeve, scratched skin. Ian worked it loose, barely aware of the sting. Walled off by the concrete ramps and the grimy

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rush of city traffic, the old mansion drowsed, *remembering.*

They all remembered — the old places. Forget the cockroaches, the piss stink in the dingy rooms, and the screaming fights in the bedrooms —they remembered better than that. Nights, when darkness hid the scars and scabs, Ian could see it. Their remembering. Warm yellow light shining through spotless windows. Neat yards. Laughter. Peace, man, and there wasn't any peace anymore — not in these stinking neighborhoods, anyway — wasn't anything beautiful, either. Try drugs and bikes and major domestic violence.

Ghostly images of green grass and flowers teased Ian. He *saw* them, felt weeds and thorns against his palms. White paint glimmered, new and clean, in the light from the freeway lamps. *Strong* memories here. Ian scored a neat circle in a window pane, winced at the tinkle of falling glass. Shit, he could use an ax. You could barely hear the freeway. A cricket chirped, and something small rustled in the leaves.

Ian forced the window up, easing it against the warped frame, not wanting to bust the glass. The old place was in good shape, and he was no vandal. He took stuff out *carefully*. Scrambing over the sill, he clicked on his pencil flash. Yellow light strobed the room: mildewed, papered wall, wood floor and moldings. The room remembered heavy old furniture, rich upholstery, and thick drapes. Ian blinked against the momentary double vision of its remembering, a little unsteady on his feet. It was hard to tell *now* from *then* as he slipped down the wide hall. Ian wondered if the grimy rush of city traffic fenced the memories in, concentrated them.

Or was this house — just maybe — what he had been looking for?

Ian breathed dust, smelled a faint scent like ancient flowers. At the edge of vision, a ghostly maid offered a tray of long-stemmed glasses to men in black and short-haired women wearing long, elegant dresses. Ian's skin twitched with the need to hide, they looked so *real.* Unseeing, unaware of Ian, they talked and laughed, red lips opening and closing soundlessly.

Memories. They were ghosts, and he knew it, but it was like they didn't mind him being here, at their party. Ian waved at them, stumbled over a loose board, and barely caught himself against a doorframe. The small adrenaline rush of his near fall banished the mist of vision. He shook himself. Check out the fireplaces, he told himself. You got rent due in a week, and VideoMart has that Walkman on sale. But the memories

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tugged at him, tempting him. He wanted to hang out at that ghostly party, pretend he *belonged* here. Ian stepped through the doorway in front of him and banged his shins on something soft and padded. An upholstered chair? The fabric looked new in the yellow pool of his flash beam. Ian heard a soft intake of breath in the darkness.

Shit! He snapped off his flash, smelled the musky odor of a warm body, heard breathing. A drunk? Some drugged-out bum? Ian's hand closed sweaty-palmed around the blade in his pocket.

Light! Blinding, brilliant, colors and textures burst to vivid life all around him — fringed drapes, lamps with beaded shades, a wood chest of drawers with a mirror on top. A woman sat up in a wide bed, clutching rose-colored satin to her chest. Her short hair haloed her pale face, bright as gold, and her eyes were wide and dark.

For a moment, Ian could only stare, breath frozen to ice in his lungs. Then he bolted, dashing blindly through the house, light flashing and gleaming on carpets and dark wood furniture that hadn't been there a few minutes ago, couldn't possibly be here now. He fought his way through the rose hedge, nearly tumbled headlong into the headlight splash of a long-haul truck on its way up the freeway ramp.

With an angry blast of its air horn, the truck churned past. Heart hammering with the aftermath of fright and his near miss, Ian darted across the ramp. Walk, he told himself when he reached the grimy sidewalks of the crackhouse slum beyond the freeway. Run, and a cop'll pick you up. *Who you running from, punk? Hands on the side of the car...*

Ian walked, rose-scratched face stinging, heart slowing gradually.

That house had been *empty*. He had checked it out yesterday.

The house wasn't empty. Ian walked the long blocks back to his apartment, seeing her face overlaid on the city shadows, remembering her wide eyes. They had been a weird color — the darkest blue he'd ever seen. They had been surprised. Not scared, not angry, just surprised. All the way home, her face teased Ian, He didn't see a single cop car.

Sunlight woke Ian next morning. His rented room was shitty, but the old brick building still dreamed faintly of flowered wallpaper and a woman's singing. Last night, Ian had dreamed about *her*. In the grimy morning light, the cracked linoleum and peeling paint made them just that — dreams. Ian pulled on jeans and sweatshirt, made himself a peanut

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butter sandwich for lunch. She had been another ghost, Ian told himself. A memory. A dream.

The city shadows were full of ghosts: old buildings, people in old-fashioned clothes. Memories. They overlaid the streets like rainbows in an oil-slicked puddle, and they had never scared Ian before, not even when he was a kid. The golden-haired woman had scared him. Because she had seemed so . . . real. As if he had actually walked into that long-ago bedroom.

What if he had stayed?

Ian thought about that as he waited for his bus in the gritty rush-hour bustle of the city's east side. I blew it, he told himself, and felt his guts squeeze down inside his belly. Maybe I fucking *blew* it.

"Did you get it?" Stocky and gray-haired, Yvonne bustled into the back room as Ian arrived.

"Huh-uh." Ian hung his jacket on a battered grandfather clock. "I'll have to try somewhere else."

"Damn." Yvonne snapped ringed fingers. "I need it this week. I thought you had a sure site?"

"It wasn't there." Ian pretended to read an invoice, struggling with the words. Yvonne always dressed in suits — very professional. She called herself an antique *broker*, and Ian didn't like her much. She got stuff for rich collectors and hotshot decorators all over the country. She didn't really give a shit about the pieces she handled. They meant money to her. Period. But she paid him O.K. Ian had worked for her since he quit school. "I'll try again tonight," he said.

"You do that." Yvonne said. "Don't let me down — you hear me? That set of Wedgwood came in this morning. Unpack it and check it against the invoice. I want it out on display this afternoon. Spotless."

"Yes, ma'am," Ian said.

ON HIS way home that evening, Ian tried another house. This one had the mantelpiece Yvonne wanted — scarred and damaged, but better than nothing. The house's broken windows had been boarded up by the city, posted with orange warning signs. A busted crackhouse. It was a dump inside, full of shit, rot and despair. Ian tried not to breathe as he checked out the mantel.

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The house remembered firelight on warm plaster walls, children's laughter, and the scent of dinner cooking. The memories seeped out of the walls, crippled and thin, weaker than the pungent stink of chemicals. Ian ran his fingers across the scarred wood of the mantel, as if he could smooth away the knife marks and gouges. Yvonne wouldn't be thrilled, but it was better than nothing. He'd bring the van, get it tomorrow night. Ian left the ruined house with relief.

Eyelids drooping, he wandered more or less homeward, letting the city's dreams guide his feet. The houses were all old here. Crummy. Ian let the plywooded windows, the chopped bikes, the weedy yards, and the split bags of garbage blur together. Now he could see it: smooth lawns, roses, kids playing tag, laughing and yelling. People were sitting on their porches or talking across their hedges, like nobody does in the real world . . .

. . . so damn *nice*.

Ian swallowed, but the ache in his chest didn't go away. The real world was crackhouses and rent and selling your ass on the street if you couldn't keep your feet under you. Ian sighed, kicked a squashed beer can into the gutter, and realized that he had reached the freeway ramps. On its tiny island, the old mansion drowsed and remembered, cut off and protected by a flood of rush-hour traffic. Ian stopped pretending that he hadn't meant to come here. He timed the flow of cars, darted across the ramp and into the thorny safety of the yard.

Ian found the old walk. The overgrown hedge was thinner here. Easy to get through. In the yard the mansion's memories closed over him like still water, trapped by the rose thorns. Look sideways a little, and the house gleamed white in the soft evening light. Ian wondered if a remembered woman was asleep inside, her golden hair spread across the pillow.

"It was you last night. In my room."

The throaty voice froze Ian. Stupid, stupid fool. She was flesh and blood after all, some kind of crazy recluse. She was as real as cops and a B & E charge. Sweating in the cool spring air, Ian turned. She was standing in the soft shadows beneath twisted old bushes, dressed in a strange-looking print dress. About his age? Nineteen? Twenty? She'd seemed older last night.

"Who are you?" she asked. "Why did you come back here?"

"I'm Ian Malone. I thought you were a ghost," Ian blurted, and winced. "I thought the house was empty."

"A ghost?" She laughed a sad note. "The house *is* empty. Did you break

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in to sleep or to shoot up?"

"I don't do drugs." They twisted the city memories into ugliness. "I was looking for . . . a mantelpiece. For my boss. She sells antiques."

A man had come around the side of the house, dressed in odd-looking shirt and pants. He carried a long pair of shears, began to snip at the hedge. The house was remembering a gardener. There was no clack of blades or rustle of leaves. She was looking at the gardener, too. When she noticed Ian watching her, she looked quickly away.

"You *see* him," Ian said breathlessly. He took a step toward her, hand reaching for her, needing to touch her, to reassure himself with the texture of warm flesh. "You're like me."

"Like you?" She stepped back quickly. "I'm a ghost. You just said so. Don't come back here — do you hear me?" The sun struck sparks from her hair as she fled into the house. It made her eyes glitter, as if they were full of molten gold, as if they were full of tears. The old house seemed to sigh, young and new in the magic light. Ian stared at his hand, still extended in front of him. His fingers had brushed her arm as she had run. He had felt . . . flesh. You couldn't feel a memory. Ian closed his hand slowly and fought his way back through the hedge, hope flickering to hot life in his chest.

Ian went back after work next evening. He couldn't have stayed away if he had wanted to, ignored Yvonne's nagging about the mantel. He half-expected to find the mansion dreaming different dreams, to find that he had imagined the tingle of flesh beneath his fingers. But she was there; sitting on a cracked marble bench beneath the overgrown hedge. "I told you not to come back," she said without real anger. "You're limping."

"I dropped a crate," Ian said. "On my foot. Chairs from France." Stolen bits of whose past? Bucks for Yvonne. Ian sat down on the grass, seeing neatly clipped lawn, feeling weedy clumps beneath his butt.

The house looked so *real* tonight — like he could go up and swing the shutters open and closed on their shiny hinges. Like he could walk in, sit down on a sofa. You couldn't hear the freeway. The bushes shut out the noise. Or maybe the traffic wasn't *there*. Maybe the freeway hadn't been built yet. "I know who you are." Ian drew a slow breath. "You're Elaine Waltham. Your old man built this house. I found a picture of you in one of Yvonne's books. You were standing right here, on the front lawn. The picture was taken in 1939. I think you were wearing the same dress."

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"I told you I'm a ghost." She didn't look at him.

"You're not." Ian caught her hand. "You're beautiful."

"Am I?" She didn't try to pull away. "How old are you, Ian? Tell me about the gardener you saw last night. Tell me how you can walk into this yard and see things that haven't existed for decades."

"You saw him, too. I'm nineteen." Almost. Ian stroked her fingers; warm, living flesh curled in his palm. "I just see stuff. It's like the houses . . . remember it. Maybe they soak up life from us. I don't know."

"That's . . . amazing."

"Oh yeah?" Ian shrugged. "Tell people you see ghosts, and see where it gets you. Shit, it doesn't even help me get stuff for Yvonne. I mean, it's not like the places remember the molding or light fixture or whatever she sends me hunting for."

"When did you start seeing these . . . memories?" Elaine asked softly.

"They were always there." Ian forced himself not to look away. He knew the look he'd see in her eyes — they always got it: *Drugs. A crazy. Better not get too close.*

It wasn't there. Those weird, beautiful eyes were soft. Full of . . . believing.

"It was . . . sort of neat." Ian kept her hand clasped tightly in his. "I thought it was some kind of magic world — the other side of the mirror or something. I'd hide under this porch where I could see a whole street full of old places. I'd sit in the dust, looking at all those neat, pretty houses, all those front doors, and I'd pretend that they were real. I played this game that if I picked the right door — the magic door — that I'd knock, and it would open. My real family would be living there — this TV-character mom and an honest-to-God dad, all loving and perfect, waiting with milk and cookies." Ian gave a short laugh, still holding on tightly, afraid to let go, afraid that she'd vanish through one of those magic doors. "Tell me about you," he said quickly. "Tell me how come I found your picture in that book."

"You called me Elaine. I didn't say it was my name." She twisted her hand free. "You're wrong about that picture." Her twilight eyes looked like dark pools in the sunset light, depthless and unreadable. "There aren't any magic doors, Ian."

"It was just a game," Ian said, but she was walking away from him, hurrying back to the sanctuary of the old mansion. "Wait!" Ian called, and

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when she didn't wait: "I'm coming back here again."

She looked back at him then, pivoting so suddenly that her hair swung across her face. "You scare me, Ian Malone," she said. "I can't stop you from coming back, can I?" Then she ran, and the mansion's door slammed closed behind her.

For a long time, Ian sat on the lush grass of a long-ago spring. He thought about a woman who had been nineteen in 1939, was nineteen now. He thought about his dreams in the dusty twilight beneath that old porch, about magic doors and the welcome smiles of those imagined parents.

The hope in his chest burned him, hot as fire.

Ian spent his days in Yvonne's stockroom, crating and uncrating antiques. He polished wood and glass and metal, tickled by faint echoes of other days, other polishing hands. Maybe chairs and bowls and brass chandeliers were part of the remembering. He'd never really thought about it before, but he wondered what would have happened if he had stripped moldings and mantels and parquet flooring from the old mansion. Would he have met Elaine? Or would he have seen her only from the corner of his eye, a golden-haired ghost, as unreal as the kids in the old, remembered yards? Ian made excuses not to go out scavenging, and closed his ears to Yvonne's bitching.

The old places remembered. Maybe, if the remembering was strong enough, past and future could touch, like his fingers had touched Elaine's.

Elaine had said that there were no doorways, but Elaine might be lying. People lied more than they told the truth. So he went by the old mansion every evening. Elaine would be sitting in the yard, on the old marble bench. They would watch the sun set and twilight creep through the hedge. They would talk.

It was a game, their talking. She kept him at arm's length — wouldn't let him touch her, wouldn't tell him anything about herself. Ian didn't push. He knew, and she knew, that if he pushed, she wouldn't be there the next evening. So Ian played his game. He was coaxing her, like you coax a squirrel in the park: sitting very still with a piece of sandwich on your palm until it finally trusted you enough to snatch it with its tiny, sharp claws. This yard *was* the past. Ian could feel it all around him, real — no memory. Sometimes he got the wild notion that if he stood up right now

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and jumped into the air with his arms spread, he would leap across some kind of invisible barrier and land *bang* in Elaine's world.

But he sat very still, coaxing Elaine with words, waiting for her to trust him enough to tiptoe up to his palm. She asked him about his childhood, and Ian told her — about growing up in the project — about the drugs and the knifings and what went on in the shadows under the stairs. He told her about the ugly reality of a dead-end present, where it didn't pay for a father to stick with his family. He told her about the boyfriends who stayed with Mom for a few days or a few months. Some of them beat him, some didn't, but he stayed out of their way anyway. He told her about the gangs, and how they feuded between the neighborhoods, shooting each other, and anyone else unlucky enough to be in the way, from their cars: white and black and Latino, killing each other over a bad deal, or a few dozen yards of filthy sidewalk.

The visions had kept him out of the gangs, set him apart. He wasn't white or black or Latino; he was Crazy Ian. The visions had made him everyone's prey, too, so he had spent more and more time in the cool dust beneath old porches, hiding in the past.

He told her because he needed to talk, to coax her, and he didn't have much else to talk about except the weather or basketball scores or who was hot on the charts. After a while he stopped waiting for her to prompt him, and just *told* her. And she listened. She had stopped contradicting him when he called her *Elaine*, and her twilight eyes were full of understanding. Not pity. Not disgust. *Understanding* — as if she knew that dusty sanctuary herself. When he realized what he was seeing in those incredible eyes, a small, hard core in his gut that he didn't even know was there dissolved. Yeah, it had been one hell of a better world back then.

"How did you find out that you were seeing the past?" she asked him one evening.

"My fifth-grade teacher, Miss Moreno. She was new that year." Ian shrugged. "Anyway, I asked her about some old buildings I'd seen, and she thought I was interested in history and stuff. So she started keeping me after school. She sort of levered me into doing this project on neighborhood history for some kind of big contest — and I figured it out. That I was seeing things the way they used to be." Ian looked at the old mansion: young and new in this dreaming yard. "I could handle it better after that. I

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decided that maybe I wasn't crazy after all." *Crazy Ian, Space Case, The Retard.* The names had sunk in after awhile. The history thing had been a pain and a *lot* of work, but he had done it, because Miss Moreno had let him figure out what he was seeing, and because she wanted him to. "Why do you want to know all this?" he asked angrily.

"Did you tell her?" Elaine asked softly. "Miss Moreno?"

"No." Ian looked away.

"Why not?" Elaine touched his arm lightly.

Elaine never touched him on purpose. "I almost did." He had been afraid that she would get The Look. "Good thing I didn't. I won the contest thing, and it was news. Because I was from a bad neighborhood, I guess. The reporters liked that. We got our pictures in the paper, and she got promoted to vice-principal in some other school. She'd said all this stuff —about how she could get me into a better high school — even help me get a scholarship to college someday. But then she left for the new job, and I never heard from her again." And the other kids had made life hell for him. For winning the contest. "She didn't really give a shit," Ian said softly.

"Maybe she meant to keep her promises." Elaine sighed. "Maybe something got in the way."

Sometimes Elaine sounded so much older than he. "You don't know how things are." Ian shook his head. "I get Yvonne all the stuff she asks for, but to her, I'm just a dumb punk who never finished high school. That's all anybody sees." He looked at her at last, anger rising in his chest. "You get stuck in a slot in this shitty world, and that's who you are, for the rest of your life. Who do you think is going to change things for me? God? Who the hell *cares*?"

"I do," Elaine said softly. "If it makes any difference."

A breathing silence filled the scant foot of space between them, a humming of understanding that in a moment they would kiss, put their arms around each other, warm flesh against warm flesh, and make love in the lush grass of this long-ago spring.

With a sound like a stifled sob, Elaine broke the spell. She lurched to her feet and hurried back through the evening light, back to the mansion. Ian let her go. She had come to his palm. He would knock on that magical door, and *she* would open it. Triumph sang in his heart as he picked his way through the hedge.

But it was her words that he remembered, all the long way home

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through the dreaming city. *I care.* He had seen his reflection in her eyes, and it hadn't been sme street punk that he'd seen. But what did she know? She came from another time. Still, it mattered that she had said that. It mattered a lot.

"I'VE GOT a job for you." Yvonne stuck her head back into the stockroom the next afternoon. "You know the old hotel on Market? Next to the fountain park? I want the balustrade to the old lobby stairs. Tonight. And don't give me any excuses about night classes, kid, or you're fired."

Hands full of Styrofoam peanuts and lead crystal, Ian blinked at her. "I thought some local group is buying that place. To restore it."

"You listening to *news* on that box of yours? Do I pay you to think?" Yvonne gave him a cold smile. "Don't worry about it, honey. Just do your job. You won't get in any trouble."

Which meant that she had cooked a deal with someone. She would strip the building, and that someone — contractor or whoever — would look the other way. If the buyers bitched, they'd blame it on vandalism and lazy cops. Yvonne had worked this scam before. Ian grimaced. "I'll go tonight, he said.

"Good boy. Be careful when you pry out those balusters. They'll be brittle." She nodded from the doorway. "You can take tomorrow morning off."

Temporary chain-link fencing surrounded the old building, but the padlock on the gate was conveniently unlocked. Uh-huh. Fingers hooked into the cold mesh, Ian looked up at the hotel. The stone facade gleamed white in the moonlight. Carved gargoyles crouched on the eaves, peering down at the marble fountain in front, thirsty monsters bound to their perches with chains of stone.

Ian shivered. In the daylight the nine-to-fivers would scurry past, thinking of lunch or deals or whom to screw tonight. They would scowl at the dirty slush of rainwater, cigarette butts and piss in the cracked fountain in the middle of the circular drive. They wouldn't look twice at the blind eyes and plywooded doors of the old hotel. *Eyesore,* they'd think. *Tear it down.*

Dumb shits. Tonight a carriage stood in that drive. The horses tossed

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their heads, stomping soundlessly on the bricks. Water leaped in the moonlight, splashed into the fountain basin. Ian shivered again. The hotel's memories were as strong as the mansion's. Stronger, maybe. It towered above his head, seven stories tall; must have been really something sixty years ago.

Ian let himself through the unlocked gate. He lugged his tool bag up the walk, beneath the blind stares of the thirsty gargoyles. Inside, in the lobby, the hotel remembered fancy wallpaper, huge vases full of flowers, and gleaming wood. It remembered men and women in elegant clothes. It remembered parties, seductions, laughter, anger, and tears. Dazed by the rush of vision, Ian wandered through the lobby. Yvonne's banister soared upward in a graceful sweep of carved walnut, waxed and shining in the glow from the crystal chandeliers. . . .

Ian closed his eyes, ran his fingers across the wood. His nerves telegraphed splinters, nicks, and carved initials. He could feel it all around him: the lobby, the past. Ian opened his eyes, still dizzy. He shook the carved wood gently, seeing satin finish, feeling dry rot and damage. If he took it, cracked the brittle old glue, pried out the balusters one by one, the memories would diminish. The hotel would die a little. He'd have taken a piece of its soul.

"No way." Darkness and dust swallowed Ian's words, making him sweat. "Not anymore," he said.

Somewhere a mouse rustled in the thick quiet. Ian picked his way back to the street, through the press of the hotel's memories.

"Since when could you afford a conscience?" Yvonne stared at him, skin puffy and yellow in the fluorescent glare of the stockroom. "You have some gratitude, kid, considering I paid you good money before you were legal working age. You are fired." She paused for a moment, expectant, waiting for him to protest or beg, willing to take him back if he groveled a little. When he said nothing, she shrugged and reached for her purse. "Here." She handed him folded bills. "Two nights' wages. Don't ask me for references."

Ian stood outside the locked stockroom door, staring at the old warehouse across the street. It dreamed vaguely of bustle and crates and bright new bricks. Screw Yvonne. Ian shoved the money into his pocket and started down the block.

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He didn't go to the mansion that evening. He didn't go next evening. Instead, he job-hunted, walking block after block through the maze of past and present that made up the city, wading through shadows and dreams, coming up hard against reality.

Reality was the fact that he was nineteen (almost), with no high school diploma, that he couldn't read very well, and had no skills worth shit —except a good idea of where you could scavenge a mantelpiece or a light fixture. Which he didn't want to do anymore anyway. Reality was a city where the homeless lived under every bridge, and you just about needed a college education to sweep out a damn store.

It didn't really matter, but he went through the motions with a kind of ritual fervor.

Outside, in the city streets, it was summer. In the island yard, sheltered by traffic and the hedge, it was forever spring. No lights showed, but Elaine answered Ian's knock right away, as if she'd been waiting for him, as if she'd known that he was coming. "I was worried about you," she said, but she made no move to touch him. "What happened?"

"I quit Yvonne," Ian said. Light seeping from the house turned her hair into a golden halo around her face. "She's going to strip the old hotel. She's going to kill it, and I'm not going to help her. So she fired me, and I can't find another job. I don't count for shit out there, Elaine. I don't belong out there, and I don't want to belong."

"Don't, Ian."

"You know how it works." He caught her wrist as she tried to retreat. "I always knew they were there — the doors. I want to stay here with you."

"Don't *do* this," she gasped. "If you want to escape, buy it on the next block. By the bag. Don't look for it here." Eyes wide and dark, she tried to twist out of his grasp. "I knew it was a mistake, your coming here. Go home, Ian."

"I have a home only until I miss rent." Cold was seeping into Ian's belly, knotting up in a lump there. "I love you," he whispered, and the sound of the words made him tremble.

"Love?" She wouldn't look at him, wouldn't meet his eyes. "You don't love me. You don't even *see* me. Go away, Ian. You never should have come here."

"It's because I'm a punk." The lump in his gut was getting bigger, colder, buckling his knees with its weight. "You're another Miss Moreno, aren't you? What was I? A little entertainment? Someone to talk to — but not

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good enough to even *touch* you? My own fault," he snarled. "I *told* you what I was, didn't I?"

His arm swung up almost on its own, fingers stiffening, muscles cording with all the years of swallowed anger, all the insults heard and ignored because they were bigger than you, or the boss, or there were more of them; so you just listened and looked at the beautiful, untouchable visions and pretended that you didn't hear, that the words weren't burning holes in your guts. His palm caught her square on the side of the face, a satisfying *crack*, rage sizzling down his arm like a thousand volts, grounding out in her flesh.

Elaine cried out, staggering sideways. Clutching the doorframe, she straightened slowly. "You child." She raised a hand to the palm print blazing on her cheek. "You blind *child*." Her voice trembled. "You want your magic world? You want to make love to me?" She grabbed his wrists, nails digging in, pressed his hands against her face, against her breasts. "So *touch* me, Ian. Look at me. *Look* at me, damn it!"

I am *looking*, he started to say, but the words stuck in his throat. He felt sagging flesh beneath his hands, felt dry, crepey skin, like he'd felt the splinters in the hotel's remembered banister. The cold light of the moon poured down into her face, and Ian made a hoarse sound in his throat. Her skin was fading and thinning, flesh growing slack on her bones, wrinkling. . . .

"No." Trembling, Ian shaped the word with his lips, but horror closed it up in his throat.

"There are no doors," Elaine cried. "Not for me, not for you. They're dreams, Ian. *Your* dreams."

Ian flinched away from bony fingers like claws. He gave a cry and plunged through the hedge. A horn blared at him as he dashed across the freeway ramp, and wheels screeched. His body flinched, expecting impact, but the car missed him. Ian ran on, stumbling on the grimy sidewalks, catching glimpses of neat yards and elegant rooflines among the dying houses.

She was lying, he told himself. She was using him, like Miss Moreno had used him. She didn't want to let some street punk into her world.

She was old.

Old, like the mansion was old.

Ian stumbled over a crack in the sidewalk and fell hard onto his hands

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and knees. The slash of pain from his scraped palms cleared his head, and he blinked up at chain-link mesh. Above his head, gargoyles stared down impassively.

The old hotel.

It was as if it had called him, reached into his blind hurting, and had tugged him through the streets with the siren call of its remembering. Light gleamed from the windows, and carriages waited in the circular drive. Maybe Elaine wouldn't let him in, but the hotel's memories were strong, too. Maybe there was another door. Ian got slowly to his feet, wiping his bleeding palms on his jeans. Beyond the fence a uniformed doorman held the carved door open, white-gloved hands fondling the brass handles. Ian climbed the fence, fingers hooking into the cold metal mesh, toes boosting him effortlessly over the barrier. The horses in the drive tossed their heads, and Ian heard the faint jingle of harness.

"Ian?" Footsteps behind him, running. "Ian, damn it, *wait*."

Elaine's voice. Halfway up the marble steps, Ian paused. An old woman stood in the street, hands shading her eyes, as if she were squinting into a bright light, or staring into dense fog. "Where are you going?" she said.

"Inside." Ian took another step. "Not your business," he said. Not anymore.

"You're right to be angry." Her voice trembled. "I knew what you saw. I knew what you thought I could do. Yes, I'm Elaine Waltham — the one whose picture you found. I remember that picture. I was nineteen. *Nineteen*. Papa blew his brains out a year after that picture was taken, because he'd been stealing money. And all of a sudden, we were poor. I got to know those hallways you grew up in — the ones with the needles in them and the piss. I know all about sleeping on the streets, too, and what you sell to stay alive. The past is just yesterday, Ian. I tried all the escapes. I looked for all the doors," she said bitterly. "It's ironic, you know? I was on my way north, and stopped off in the city just to see if the old house was still standing. Because I remembered being happy there. And then you walked in, and my God, I *saw* it. My old room. Everything. And I saw . . . myself."

On the far side of the fence, an old woman clutched the chain-link mesh like a prisoner, or the inmate of a concentration camp. The mansion had remembered her with golden hair and a twenty-year-old body. The hotel didn't know her, and her wispy hair blew across her withered face.

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"You were right," Elaine said softly. "I used you. I let you think I'd found a door, because. . . ." Her voice broke. "Oh God, I was *young* when you were there. But I wasn't lying to you. I care, Ian. And I'm sorry."

Prisoner trapped by the steel mesh of the present. Ian stared down at her from the top of the steps. The old hotel didn't remember her, so her shoulders humped and her thin hair was wispy and white. How old? Sixties? Something like that. Old. Behind him the doorman was holding the door open, waiting.

Truth or another lie, Elaine was wrong about the doors. Ian stretched his arms, fingers tingling. The past pressed against him, thick as a humid August afternoon. Inside, the clerk was waiting behind his marble-topped counter. Three more steps, and the doorman would close the door behind him. The lobby would be bright and elegant with brocaded wallpaper, crystal vases full of flowers, and gleaming parquet.

Another step.

"Ian?" Elaine cried. "Don't go in there. Please?"

She sounded frightened. She sounded distant, as if she were a block away instead of a few yards, as if the metal fence shut out her words.

"Don't throw your talent away. You can let us *see*. You can let us *remember*. We need you, Ian."

Thin words, meaningless, like the sound of distant traffic. At last, Ian thought, and stepped forward, past the doorman, kicking his legs out strongly, like he owned the whole hotel. The heavy doors closed behind Ian. I'm here; oh God, I'm here. Ian pivoted slowly, drinking in the light, the warm colors of lobby wallpaper and flowers, blinded by that light, drunk on it. Holding his breath, he walked across the polished floor and put his hand on Yvonne's banister. Smooth wood: no splinters, no rot. Exultation shook Ian, turned his knees shaky. I found the door. *I* found the bloody door!

Breathlessly, heart pounding, Ian hurried over to the desk. "I'd like a room," he said to the dark-haired man behind the counter.

The man's eyes didn't flicker.

"Did you hear me? Hey, you." Ian banged the silver bell beside the fountain pen.

No response. Cold tickled Ian's neck. He turned slowly, searching the lobby. Two plump women in old-fashioned dresses laughed together on the sofa. A man stared angrily at a gold pocket watch. "Hey!" Ian yelled,

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but no one looked up.

The hotel was remembering, but it didn't remember Ian, any more than it had remembered Elaine. Ian walked stiff-legged across the lobby, touched the shoulder of the angry man, half-hoping that he'd swing around and raise a fist. Ian felt flesh beneath his fingers, tried to wrench the man around to face him. He had no strength — couldn't do it. Sweating, hot and cold in waves, Ian stepped back. The hotel didn't remember him, so these people didn't see him — was that it? Ian looked down at his jeans. Blood from his scraped palms streaked the faded fabric, dark in the yellow light. Tentatively, he touched the denim, felt cloth beneath his fingers, felt his own warm flesh.

I am a ghost, Ian thought, spinning on his heel, dizzy, afraid. A ghost in the hotel's dream? No one blinked. No one looked. He didn't belong. He didn't *exist*. Ian dashed for the entrance, shoved open the heavy door. Marble steps jarred his feet, and horses stomped in the driveway. Sobbing dryly, chest hurting, Ian ran across the bricks, out into the street . . .

. . . and stumbled over the top step. In front of him, the doorman bowed, gloved hands fondling the brass handles. *Trapped,* whispered a tiny voice in Ian's head. *You have always been trapped.* Ian struggled to his feet, terror poised over his head like an avalanche, ready to rush down and bury him alive.

No doors? Could a ghost haunt a dream? What would happen when Yvonne hired someone else to come in and strip out the banister, rip up the flooring? Would he be trapped forever?

Or was he already trapped forever?

"Elaine?" he whispered.

No answer. The hotel didn't remember her. "Elaine!" Ian screamed, throat hurting. "Where *are* you?" Her name came to his lips on its own. Elaine — no ghost, flesh and blood. *I care,* she had said, and maybe, maybe *maybe* she wasn't just another Miss Moreno — and anyway, there wasn't anyone else. "Where *are* you?" he yelled.

And he heard her.

Not a voice, not really. He didn't *hear* her with his ears, like he heard the harness jingling on the horses in the driveway. But she was out there. He could feel her. Golden hair, crepey skin; it was as if past and present met in her — as if he had brought them together somehow, as if she were here and weren't. Ian closed his eyes, hoping, needing to hope, needing to

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pray, and thinking that he didn't know how, and who would listen anyway?

Touch me. . . .

Touch? Eyes still closed, Ian remembered the feel of her weathered face beneath his fingers when his eyes saw golden hair and smooth skin. He edged down the wide steps, toes groping for the bricks of the drive.

Touch. . . .

Ian squeezed his eyes tighter, imagined the cracked and buckled surface, remembering the feel beneath his feet, *making* himself feel it. Rough. Uneven. Another step, another. He groped his way blind across the drive, gasped as his toe stubbed something hard. The fountain. Holding his breath, Ian knelt. Bent across the stone curb of the basin, he hesitated, fear in his gut, afraid, afraid that it wouldn't work, that he'd open his eyes to horses and the blind stares of the hotel's ghosts.

Do it!

With a gasp, Ian plunged his arms into cold water. Feel *dirty*. Feel rainwater and piss and trash. Soggy paper wrapped his wrist. Ian grimaced, felt the gentle nudge of God-knows-what. A siren howled in the distance as he opened his eyes.

Beyond the cracked fountain, an old woman leaned against the fence, fingers hooked in the metal mesh. The hotel didn't remember her, so her shoulders were humped and her thin hair was wispy and white. She had opened a door for him after all. Filthy water ran down Ian's arms, dripped onto the cracked bricks. "I can go to the people who are buying the hotel," he said. "I can tell them what Yvonne is up to. They'll say, *Thanks, kid,* and tell me to beat it."

"Show them what you can do." Elaine let go of the fence, turned away. "That's all it'll take."

She was running from him, like she'd done at the old mansion, only this time she'd disappear into the grimy city shadows and never reappear. The fence shook with a metallic sound as Ian scrambled over — with the sound of harness jingling in the distance. He landed hard, impact buzzing all the way up his legs. "Just hold it!" He ran after her, shirt sticking cold and wet to his chest. "You can't walk away," he panted, grabbing at her. "Or were you lying when you said you cared? Are you another Miss Moreno or not?"

"You don't need me. Don't you understand?" She clenched her fists

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suddenly, raging at him. "I was *nineteen*. That's what you saw, and you made me see it, too. You're beautiful. You *said* that to me. Do you think I want to look into your face and see what's there now? I don't want that kind of mirror, thank you."

They were standing in front of an old brick house that had been turned into offices. It remembered elm trees for Ian, remembered golden hair, remembered a young woman who must have visited once. Elaine made a hoarse sound in her throat, started to turn away. Ian stopped her. He cupped her face between his palms, concentrating on the soft, crepey feel of her skin beneath his fingers, seeing the overlaid gloss of youth, like a rainbow on an oil-slicked puddle. Her eyes were her own: weird, beautiful, twilight eyes.

"You're old," he said. "You don't make me horny, O.K.? So, I've said it, all right? I talked to *you* in the yard, didn't I? You called it a talent — what I can do." He looked back at the hotel and shivered. "I've worked for Yvonne for years, and she's never seen shit, around me. Maybe the hotel people won't, either," he said slowly. "Maybe they can't see anything but a punk, and maybe I can't make them see different because . . . that's all *I* see, too." He swallowed. "You're the one who sees something different." Like he saw golden hair, here in the shadow of the brick building. Ian shrugged irritably. "You have to help me," he said.

"I don't *have* to do anything. You scare me, Ian Malone." Elaine stared down at her young-old hands. "I *want* what you show me. I want it so damn much, and it hurts like hell." She laughed a harsh, cracked note. "You want to trade?" she said. "Your visions for mine? I'll help you persuade those historian types that you can make their history live for them, and you'll make me young again, every other block? Hell, I told you that I cared, didn't I?" Her face twitched. "But I . . . hope you understand someday. How much it hurts. I hope someday that you meet yourself in those shadows of yours."

Ian didn't understand, but he took Elaine's hand, warm flesh squeezing warm flesh, finding that he wanted to comfort her. All around them the city dreamed, remembering yesterday, waiting for tomorrow. Elaine sighed, old woman rainbowed with youth.

"Oh hell," she said, and gave him a lopsided smile.

Hand in hand, they walked down the street, threading their way through the light and shadow of the city's remembering.

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After eighteen years in Alaska, Michaelene Pendleton moved back to the desert to warm up. She has worked as a drug therapist, a journalist, and now owns a hotel in Moab, Utah — all of which qualify her to write fantasy, which she does ably. She has sold stories to Omni, Asimov's Science Fiction Magazine, *and* Amazing Stories. *This is her first appearance in F&SF. She writes that "Rising Star" grew out of a discussion with Clarion West friends about how a dragon could make a living in these recessionary times. Her answer provided inspiration for our cover, and a wonderful story as well.*

Rising Star

By Michaelene Pendleton

I WAS PLUNGING IN A WIND-shrieking dive, wings snicked in close to my back, riding the fine edge of control, claws spread, working my ribs like bellows to pump up my fire, anticipation dripping from both tips of my tongue, and dropping like fate on a frizzy-haired old mage robed in tatty blue velvet, when — BAM! — he slammed me with a bolt of magickal dragonbane stronger than hammered lightning and twice as bright.

The blast fried all my senses, blinded and deafened me, flung me spinning down a long, dark tunnel, my wings flailing for lift and not finding any air to grab. Tumbling in a lightless void, sparked here and there with the tracks of stars. Freezing from a cold sharper than a Viking's nightmare of Hel, damping my fire to faint tendrils of smoke oozing out my nostrils, icing over both sets of eyelids and turning my wing membranes as brittle as rime frost on a still pond.

The battle was a mistake from the beginning, a defamation of character

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leading to inevitable confrontation. I'd been accused of taking a young virgin girl. That was a long-bearded lie. I will admit that when I was not long out of the shell I appreciated the delicate savor of virgin flesh, boy's or girl's, but after laying my first egg clutch, my taste turned to full-grown males. Their meat is richer, stronger-flavored — in truth, gamier — than the pale flesh of young women. Anyway, the local maidens keep themselves starved down to skin and bone until they attract a mate. After that, well, while it is grudgingly permitted to take breeding females, my Line has always had more care for our honor. There's not much sport in harvesting a woman too pregnant to run, or too concerned with protecting her young to have the sense to hide. And children aren't worth the bother unless you round up a gaggle of them.

I hadn't tormented and dined on anyone but full-grown males for two or three centuries, usually the ones who came proudly shouting what they thought was my true name, riding fat juicy horses and encased in metal shells which sizzled a nice crust on them.

Now there was true sport! Dodging their sharp, pointy little lances, huffing great gouts of dusky smoke, fending off swords with my claws, and finally broiling them medium-rare with one good blast of flame after enough tormenting to get their sap fully risen. Tasty, oh my, yes.

Unfair that I was banished from life and light for something I didn't even do.

Time had no meaning in the void, only emptiness and a great, aching loneliness that gnawed and rended my soul with fangs more terrible than any beast magickal or mundane. Abandoned, my life ripped out of time, I floated through the beginnings and endings of worlds unknowing, alone and unmade, reined back from the black rage of berserker despair only by the raw, desperate need to survive. I am *Draconis verdigris*. We do not give up.

With a concussion that rattled my brain inside the wedge of my skull, I dropped from the void into a night sky overwhelming with sound and color and scent. The sudden transition shocked my senses. I plummeted like a hunk of granite, falling, not flying, terrorized by the rush of warm and sudden life. By the time I got my wits about me, I was too close to the ground to do more than flare my wings and brace for impact.

I hit the ground hard enough to knock my wind out and snap two spines

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at the end of my tail. But I was alive.

The scents were alien to my nostrils, revealing a hot, dry, barren place instead of the forested fjords of home. A slice of moon showed me a land of blasted, jagged rock, sand still warm from the day's sun, strange twisted bushes and trees armored with thorns, powdered with dust. Unknown tracks patterned the sand and disappeared over rock, to reappear again in the next patch of sand. I recognized nothing.

I could hear the skritch of wind-shifted twigs against rock, the whisper of sand moving over itself, claw-scuttlings of tiny creatures, and once a wild wailing that could have issued from the stretched throat of a wolf. But no birdsong, no rill of water or the slow, cold conversations of salmon, no thrashing of brush as elks beat the velvet from their antlers.

My fire was almost out. I lay still, saving what energy remained to me. I can fast for a century or so if necessary but the lethargy in my long-sinewed muscles and the vast emptiness in my belly told me my time in the void had been much longer than two, three or even four hundred years.

I was too weak to hunt, too weak to even move. I lay with one wing crumpled under my body and couldn't shift enough to free it. I pumped my ribs and exhaled. No fire, just a whisper of smoke, not enough heat to warm a leftover snack.

Something moved across the sand in front of my nose. A blunt-tailed lizard, beaded black and orange across its back, moving slowly, its tail in counterpoint to its torso as it waddled cautiously closer, drawn by the fading heat of my body.

A lizard. A relative. An ancestor, if you believe the legends of the beginnings of our race. Which made eating it uncomfortably close to cannibalism.

Damn ethics. I was starving. I scooped it off the sand with my tongue. One crunch and it was gone. Barely a tidbit to my hunger, but its brief taste gave me hope. I cast out my senses, pushing back the creeping cold of death.

There were sparks of warm life all around me. I lay still and let mammalian curiosity bring the creatures within range of my glance. Once under my basilisk stare, they marched obligingly into my jaws. Rabbits, a porcine creature much smaller than the wild boars of home, a thin, slab-sided wolflike thing with dirty gray-yellow fur, each one renewed my strength, stoked the coals in my fire-chamber.

I didn't torment any of them. There is no honor in tormenting a creature

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too simple to fully realize what it has to fear. For tormenting to be honorable, as well as pleasurable, you need prey that can imagine its own demise, which leaves us with only humans, magpies, foxes, and two species of swine.

I couldn't yet fly, but I could stand and shake out my cramped wings, flex my talons and stretch hindlegs and forelegs, surveying my length for serious hurt, and finding none. Able to move, I could hunt.

Cattle are the same the world over. Brainless and toothsome. I stalked a herd and killed four while they were still entranced, a quick slash of claw, eating two of them raw, choking down their uncooked flesh, feeling their meat and blood flood my muscles with life, fueling my fire.

Three deep breaths. I raised my head, flexing my neck to clear the passage, and belched out a stream of fire that lit the night sky and splashed liquid flame over rock and sand.

I was *alive!* I shrieked my challenge to this world, a long ringing clarion that refuted death and said to all, "Beware. *Hic est draconis!*"

When the echoes of my cry died away, the night was utterly silent. Nothing moved, or hardly breathed. Life huddled close to the earth, frozen in terror, knowing with the memory of long-dead forebears that its only protection lay in invisibility.

I seared the other two dead cows and ate my first civilized meal by the graying light of dawn, relishing the hot, herbivore-scented meat, picking my teeth clean with splinters of leg bones.

As the sun tipped a horizon jagged with the backbones of mountains, I spread my wings, flexing the long vanes and stretching their prismed membranes. Light flashed from the translucent scales of my wings and the green-gold plates that lay flat along the reptilian curves of my body. The acid-washed bronze of spines, talons and the two spiraled horns that swept back from my wide triangular brow were gilded in the early light. From the egg, I knew that I was beautiful, but only now, after surviving the worst that magic could do, after eons in the void, rebirthed weak and helpless into a new world, only now did I know my own true strength. In this world or any other, I am fear. I am why men flinch and look up at the shadow of a crow.

With one strong downthrust of wing, I sprang into the air.

The ascending sun gave the air substance. I rose and soared, riding the

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warm currents with barely the flick of a wingtip for control, then diving, twisting, rollicking in the freedom of flight.

When I settled, I found myself looking down upon a very strange land. Not a forest in sight, no water, no villages or farmsteads, just sere, barren earth spiked with sharp upthrusts of gray and yellow rock as far as I could see.

In the cantilevered bone over my eyes, the pits that read the magnetic currents of the world swirled with nausea, telling me that, wherever I was, it was untold leagues away from my northern forests, a long way south and farther west than any seafarer had dared venture. In fact, if the men of my time who considered themselves learned were right, I should have been either in the middle of Oceanus Incognita or off the edge of the earth. Well, all *Draconi* know that the earth is not flat, but as round as a Saxon's skull, and I wasn't swimming. So much for learned men. The one thing I was sure of was that I had better come to like this place because it was going to be my new home.

After flying for most of the day, I was certain it was a home I would not have chosen. Too empty. Several times I saw flying things, never close enough to challenge, nor even to be sure that they were *Draconi*, especially since they flew with no beat of wing, incredibly fast and unbelievably high.

The ground below me was streaked here and there with straight paths of smooth gray stone. Along the lines moved what looked to be scarabs or possibly pill bugs, large beetles of ugly, flat colors. Bugs are not fit prey for an adult of my Line, but these were *very* large beetles. I circled down to have a closer look.

Two of them stopped beneath me. One was a bilious brown and the other solid white with blue and red fires flashing on its back. They reeked of burning lamp oil, forge-hot metal, and some acrid effluvia that stung my nostrils. A man got out of the white one.

I went into a stall, forgetting to flap, in my amazement. What kind of a world is this where men encase insects in armor and ride inside them?

The man walked up beside the brown beetle. I heard two loud pops and he sprawled on the ground. The brown beetle roared and ran away.

It's hard to resist running prey. I chased off after the beetle, overflying it, then flaring down in front of it. It shrieked and stopped. Two men leaped out, shouting in a tongue I had never heard but, with the inborn knowledge of all *Draconi*, could understand. They weren't being complimentary

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about my ancestry, nor were they offering me proper challenge. In truth, they were downright insulting. They pointed their hands at me. I heard more popping sounds and something stung my breastbone.

Well, if they had no honor, I had no obligation. I charred them with one blast, setting the beetle aflame as well. As I reached to skewer dinner, the damned bug exploded! It blasted me muzzle over mead kettle, rolling me like a puffball along the ground. A piece of its armor whacked me between my horns and knocked me cross-eyed. It also burned my dinner to two lumps of cinder.

I settled for beef again that evening. Obviously I was going to have to learn more about this place before I could safely hunt humans here.

It took several days to find a cave. My new lair wasn't much of a cave, only a deep hollow in dirty gray sandstone rather than an arching granite cavern, mined smooth by dwarfs. Unwelcoming, too, with no seeping water for a bathing pool, and no heaps of shining gold to cozy it up a bit.

In truth, I was beginning to suspect that gold might be hard to come by in this country. There was no smell of it on the two men I hadn't eaten, and no lovely aroma in the air of new-mined gold freshly brought to light.

I had to keep reminding myself that I was fortunate to be alive. Despair became a new taste on my tongue. No honorable prey proclaiming challenge, no gold to be found. And in this world, I found I did not rule the skies.

One darkmoon night, I was frolicking in the air, playing with the winds rather than having a care for my safety.

The creature was on me before I was even aware of it. It came at me with a banshee shriek, riding the rumble of Ragnarok thunder, spewing a tail of fire, tossing me like a mayfly in its turbulent wake. It left behind a reek of oil and metal that told me it was akin to the ground beetles.

I lost a lot of sky before I got lift under my wings again. That may be what saved me. It had circled around at me, fire sparking from its rigid, backswept wings. Something ripped through my right wing, shredding one membrane panel, flipping me over on my back. It was lunging down on me. Flailing at the air, all control gone, I was helpless. We were less than sixty rods above the broken ground, and I was looking Death in her cold eye, when it suddenly pulled up, screaming high into wider air.

I flared into a stall, and twitched down into a good-sized gully in the desert floor, making the best speed my wounded wing would allow. I could

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hear it above me, searching, but fearing to fly too low. When it was gone, I ascended and limped back to my lair.

My pride was badly dented that night. In the long hours before dawn, I wrestled with the demon of realization that I was no longer the most powerful being in the air. No griffin, no winged Sphinx, no Valkyrie of my time could have withstood me — any more than I could stand up to the unholy amalgam that had attacked me.

When it was coming straight for me, I had seen that men rode inside the armored flying insect. Could it be that in this place men had handfasted with the enemies of mammals and warm-blooded reptiles alike, and used them for steeds? What price had they paid, I wondered, for that evil alliance?

That was when I knew despair.

I took cattle for my hunger and stayed on the ground after dark, enwrapped in self-pity, angry anew at my fate. Restless, wanting the world that was gone, trying to make sense of this new world.

I was lonely. No trembling wizards braving my hunger, outstretched hands offering jewels from Far Aegyptus in return for the knowledge they asked of me. No dwarfs bringing rough-hewn gold in worshipful tribute. No fields of harvesters to swoop down on just for the fun of watching them scatter. No long evenings of philosophical dispute with learned witches clothed in bone amulets and rivers of dark hair. No ritual of challenge and combat.

No mate.

The hot nights stirred my blood. For the first time I understood the rampages of my southern kin among the men of the desert who wore curved swords and braided their beards for Allah. We *Draconi* of the northern mists and chilling rains are slower in our passions, but they are deep, deep as the black waters of the Ice Sea. Once aroused, we do not waver.

I kept a tight hold on my yearnings. Going berserker in my injured condition would be dog-stupid. But there is no challenge in preying on cattle, skinny deer, and the odd razorback or rabbit. Men are really the only fit prey, and I wasn't having much success hunting men. The rules had changed and I didn't know the new ones.

One morning I woke to a low rumble and the insect reek. My first

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instinct was to burst from my cave, belching flame and ready to attack the creature that dared invade my domain. My recent experiences, however, counseled caution. I crept from the shadows into the lemon-yellow light of dawn.

The rocky ground before my lair sloped down some way then leveled out into a smooth sand floor. Sitting on the sand, surrounded by its own stench, emanating waves of heat, was a bulky, blue-carapaced snout beetle almost as large as I am. Beside it, leaning on its long nose, stood a man.

Both my hearts hammered in my breast. He smelled of gold.

I couldn't take him while he was protected by the insect. With gold at stake, I didn't want the cursed thing exploding and destroying the beginnings of my hoard.

To lure him away, I stretched my jaws, tightened my throat and began to sing. It was a song I had learned from the Rhine Loreleis, a wordless flow of music in a minor key, complete with two dark-hued harmonies that hinted of sensual twinings in the night, of love and lust and unearthly delight. The Loreleis always could weave a good tune.

It caught him. He turned his head, listening, not yet understanding. He drank from a glass bottle and I smelled the sharp bite of brandywine. One hand went to his mouth, a spark glowed, and smoked drifted from his nostrils.

Smoke? From a human?

He looked wholly human, and if he was a mage, he didn't dress the part. His trews were close-fitting dark-blue cloth and his tunic was black leather, pigskin by its smell, open down the front. Under it he wore something white that came up close around his neck, but no sign of a weapon, not even a bodkin. I drew in a suppressed breath: gold glinted from his throat and one wrist. Saliva dripped from my tonguetips and I almost lost the thread of my song.

He looked up the broken hill toward me and I flattened close to the ground, out of his line of sight, crooning for all I was worth, tempting him to answer the siren song.

His boots scraped on the rock. When I saw the crown of his head, I reared up to my full height and fixed him with one baleful golden eye.

He stumbled to a stop, dropping the bottle, his mouth sagging agape, his limbs suddenly frozen. The insect didn't explode, no curses magical enveloped me. Finally something was going properly in this strange world.

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I called him to me. He came, moving in the stiff-jointed way of the entranced. I studied him carefully while I held him in thrall — I'd had enough surprises. He seemed as human as men of my time. He wore his hair longer than the short helmet-cut of a cataphract, his jaw was beardless, and his eyes were covered by two round black pieces of glass. I was familiar with glass of magickal properties, but this glass, whatever its purpose, gave off no arcane aroma. I touched him with the tips of my tongue and he shuddered in a most human fashion.

I backed him against a slab of rock and curved both wings to fence him round before I released him from my stare.

For a really satisfactory tormenting, it's wise to wait them out in silence, let them speak first. Often those first words reveal their deepest fears, giving you a direction for the torment.

He was quiet for a goodly time, weaving a bit as if he were having trouble with his balance. He reached up and removed the glass things from his face, then ran his hand down his chin. His eyes, dark, bagged, and red-rimmed, touched me, slid away, then crept back. His voice was broken into bits like gravel in a streambed, hissing and rattling. "Oh man, I have got to lay off the booze. I'm losing it." He scuffed his hands at me. "Well, you just piss off. I don't need very large, lovely green dragons on top of everything else."

Obviously this man wasn't understanding his situation.

He put one hand against the rock to steady himself. "Go on, beat it. The rest of my life may be going down the toilet, but I refuse to have DTs, too. There are no dragons. I'm asleep. I'm dreaming you."

I chuckled and he cringed away from the sooty heat. I stretched out one foreclaw and delicately nicked the back of his hand. I licked a scarlet drop from the point of my claw. "Dreaming, are you?"

"Shit," he said.

He put the glasses back on his face. "All right, if you're going to kill me, do it. Get it over with."

He wasn't cooperating. Yes, he was scared, but by now he should have been down on his knees, babbling to various divine beings to intercede and save his paltry little life, which, in my experience, they never do. Circling deep in the currents under his surface fear was an urge to die almost draconian in its bleak intensity. A human with a Death wish? I'd thought that reserved for higher forms of life. This man piqued my interest. "Are you so eager to die?" I inquired.

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His mouth twisted into a sour line. "That was my intent, yes. Why else come to the Mojave-godforsaken-Desert?"

"Why?"

"You tell me. The production company folded, I can't pay my bills, the producer's assistants' assistants won't return my phone calls, and my last decent client just went over to William Morris. Next thing you know, headwaiters won't seat me during rush hour. I'm not waiting around for the luncheon postmortems on poor old Terry Pierce's career, nice guy, just couldn't cut it, heard he slunk back into the Great Flyover somewhere, all that bullshit. A bottle of Halcion, a quart of Stoli, and the whole problem fades away." He creaked out a laugh. "I sure as hell didn't expect to end up fried by a dragon, a mythical beast that doesn't even exist, which must mean that I'm crazy, too."

Although that didn't make a whole lot of sense, I was a little irked that he still didn't believe in me. "I am not mythical," I said. "I am an adult female *Draconis* of the *verdigris* Line. I was thrown into your world by the magic of a second-rate wizard who got lucky."

"Magic? Not even a hack scriptwriter would believe that one. The only magic these days is in the movies." He went still, as if every muscle in his body were suddenly frozen. "Movies. Jesus, Mary and Joseph, if you are real —" He pulled the glasses off and took a step toward me.

I hissed and he backed up. "You will find that I am very real. Pray to whatever gods you revere, man. I will give you that time."

He raised his hands. "Wait a minute. Stop. Can't we cut a deal here?"

Bargaining is an honorable reaction to tormenting. I raised my head and vented a little flame into the cool morning air. "What did you have in mind?"

Fire always shakes them. He managed to keep most of the fear out of his voice. "You don't kill me, and I make us both so filthy rich we'll puke."

Not exactly a revolutionary bargaining point, and rather indelicately stated, but he was trying. "You promise gold?"

"Gold? If that's how you want it, sure. Here" — he tore the gold from his neck and wrist — "you want gold, take these. The Rolex alone is worth six thousand. Consider it a down payment."

I could feel a new wish for life born in him. That's what tormenting is all about, the rising and dashing of hope. The pleasure flowed through my body like sex or flight. "How will you get this gold you offer?"

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"Just by signing papers, babe. You let me represent you, do an exclusive contract with me, and I'll have every major studio begging to use you. Shit, Spielberg and Lucas will go fucking nuts! You'll be the biggest thing to hit the movies since Godzilla!"

He continued in a language just as arcane as any first-water mage. His words didn't matter. I felt his excitement, the hot rush of his human desires, the need in his blood not only to live, but to succeed at this plan he was concocting. Humans are most interesting when they are fired with that singular drive to create. His life force burned more brightly the longer he talked.

"So," he finished, "have we got a deal?" He rubbed his palms together. His aura was vivid with life.

I looked down at him, holding my silence until both color and hope faded from his face. His shoulders sagged. "I think not," I said.

His eyes flinched but he stood his ground. "Nothing I can say will change your mind?"

I turned my head to fix him with the balefire of one hungry eye. In the act of inhaling a fire-breath, I hesitated. He was really quite brave, facing me with no weapons, without even the *expectation* of me, almost as cast adrift from his referents as I had been in the void, yet controlling his fear. He had the desperate courage of a dragonet facing a phalanx of lancers. His visage was even faintly draconic, long and thin, bone-edged along its planes and hollows. His eyes and hair were black and shining like the scales of *Draconis enbonii,* the Line of my first chosen egg-mate.

And in truth, I was very lonely. My Line is more solitary than most, but here in this place of so many unknowns, I needed a touchstone to link me to sanity, even if it was only the limited conversation of a human. I had the suspicion I wasn't going to find another of my own kind.

I hadn't answered his question. When I released him from the entrancement of my gaze, he slumped against the rock at his back. "O.K.," he rasped, "I get it." He dragged one hand over his face. "Can I smoke first?"

So I hadn't imagined it. It was against all reason, but I knew I had seen it. In the strange ages of change I'd missed, could humans and *Draconi* somehow have become kin? "Please do," I said.

He reached into his clothes and brought out a thin white stick. He put it between his lips, holding his other hand to its tip. I heard a small snick! And suddenly his fingers were aflame. It startled me, raising a wild hope,

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until I saw that he held in his palm a small metal device that actually produced the fire. He inhaled deeply, then let tendrils of blue smoke drift out his nostrils.

Disappointment was as deep as the hope had been vaulting. Not kin, then, not real fire. Still, it was something to note that down the ages, humans had retained enough memory of us to preserve our ways. To show that I accepted his reverence, I politely breathed some of my own smoke to join his.

He coughed. He looked up at me, a slash of smile pulling his mouth askew. "Go for it, babe. At least 'Death by Dragon' makes a better headline than 'Small-time Agent OD's.' Too bad no one will ever read it."

I sucked in a great draft of air, arching my neck, raising the points of my wings. White-hot the flame roared, incandescent heat, hissing and crackling, searing up my throat, out between my long jaws, to splash harmlessly over rock and sand, because at the last instant, I couldn't do it. I didn't want to kill him. I'd found food to sustain my body, uninteresting food, true, but enough to keep me alive. Now I needed sustenance for my mind. This man had the courage to pretend to laugh at Death. How could I kill a being capable of that?

"How much gold?" I said.

HE OPENED his eyes. Dark hair stuck sweat-slicked to his cheeks. His voice was a whisper. "To tell the truth, I don't think I could figure your take of a ten-million-dollar contract and 3 percent of the gross, after my commission of course, right at this particular moment."

What amount of gold is honorable in this age? I suppose, like in any other age, as much as you can get. In some ways, the world does not change. His two pieces of gold lay before me, throwing back the light with a soft gleam. Centuries of tradition named him prey, life to be tormented and taken. But the mind must rule the blood. I did not want to kill him. There were none to judge me. In this new world I could make my own rules.

I settled back on my haunches, tucking in my wings. As the sun rose to bake us in a welcome heat, between us we reasoned a bargain that would allow me to let him live. Against all sensible argument, I put my trust in him, agreeing to his plans, even telling him my True Name to seal the bargain, although he said we'd have to change it because Sigrigrantharisis

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was too long for something called billboards. There was much I did not fully understand in his words, but I could feel his eager interest in me.

By the time we parted, I was hungry enough that I had to stop looking at him. To hold me over until I could find acceptable prey, I asked for the insect.

"The what?"

I pointed with my snout. "The insect that carries you in its belly. The blue one down there, may I take it for prey?"

His teeth flashed white as he grinned. Strong, sharp canines, I noted. "It's not an insect, it's a machine."

"A mechanical device? Like a catapult or a wormscrew?" My voice held doubt.

"Sort of. Let me explain cars to you another time. Right now I've got the media event of the century to promote." He patted my slanting shoulder, a little hesitantly. "Babe, we are going to make so much money, it'll be indecent."

Just before climbing into his insect-car, he said, "Why didn't you waste me right off?"

If I correctly understood the idiom, some questions lie best unanswered. I hacked a blotch of smoke at him. He didn't ask again.

He had the courage to talk to me instead of immediately trying to skewer me with something sharp; and he was only the second human in my experience to recognize that, in truth, I am an exceedingly lovely green dragon.

In less than a quarter moon, Terry completed the arrangements for his "media event." On the agreed day, just as sunset turned to dark, he gathered a large assembly of humans known as *flacks* on a high butte of rock not far from my lair.

I followed Terry's instructions as if I were, in truth, born to what he called "show business." In the afternoon I ate several fat cows to curb my instinct to prey on humans, since even I could understand the consequences of such an action. I preened my scales and burnished my horns, spines, and claws until they shone like sea-gold. Then I lay hidden, waiting for Terry's signal.

In his parlance, we blew their socks off. Gliding silently, I swooped down on them from the rear, blasting a long stream of fire as I passed, then

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circling to hover, wings flared, spitting sparks and roaring in my most ferocious voice.

It was like stirring a nest of mice. Some froze in terror, some ran in wild panic. The running ones I turned back, showing off my acrobatic skill, diving and dancing in the air, huffing just enough flame to scare them without really hurting anyone. When they were all herded together again, I landed among their cowering forms, let off one last gout of flame into the black sky, then lowered my head so Terry could stand with his arm around my neck while he convinced the *flacks* that I was not, after all, going to eat them en brochette. When they found that I talk, they went wild, all yelling at once, popping flashing lights in my eyes. Terry controlled their questions, only allowing me to respond to the ones for which we had created answers that Terry thought would be acceptable to the media.

It was a stupendous success.

So here I am, the hottest star in Hollywood. I have my own dressing room, a converted semitrailer with my stage name in red uncial Gothic letters on the side. I get a hundred thousand per speaking appearance, my price for a cameo role is higher than Brando's, and the Koreans are negotiating for my endorsement on a theme park called DragonLand. Kitty Kelly is writing my unauthorized biography.

Terry makes all the deals. I can't fit inside the offices. Though if the negotiations aren't going well, we often arrange for me to stick my head in the window and huff a little smoke now and then. That usually simplifies the bargaining process.

My last feature was an FX film, with me playing two roles, good dragon versus bad dragon. I reluctantly allowed them to dye my scales, but only because Terry convinced me that I need to be able to play against type for career longevity. He's now working on some deal where I get a "love interest." I've explained the draconian way of these things, but Terry insists that humans will like me better, and spend more at the box office, if they can anthropomorphize me. I'd rather be feared, but if it makes Terry happy and keeps the gold flowing in, I'll be lovable. For a couple of movies, anyway. Then I want Terry to buy an option on *Beowulf* so we can tell the truth of that story.

It's a fat, comfortable life. No knights trying to puncture me, no magicians hurling spells at me, no priests cursing my name for all eternity. All the treasure any dragon could want, beautiful people sucking up to me

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and wanting their pictures with me in all the tabloids. I take my rest on a hard, lumpy pile of bright yellow gold. My own chef presents me with the tenderest pedigreed Japanese beef on the hoof and ready for broiling.

Still, I do miss the thrill of the hunt and the occasional torment. Terry is adamant that, no matter how toothsome, I'm not allowed to eat any more of my co-stars. I did charbroil that hairy little rat dog that supposedly saved the world from me in my first feature. Terry took care of the bad press and explained that it would be really hard to get parts if I kept that up, so I promised I wouldn't do it again.

But I don't suppose they'd miss an extra now and then, would they? Maybe a stuntman or a bit player? And, I promise, only after the production is wrapped.

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Mark McCloskey is a well known poet whose work has received the Theodore Rothke Poetry Prize. He has published four books of poetry, and his work has recently appeared in Poetry Northwest, *and* Zone 3. *He writes mystery novels under a pseudonym, and has spent a number of years teaching English at major universities. "The Black Ferry" marks his first appearance in F&SF.*

The Black Ferry

By Mark McCloskey

THE CALL WAS too important to make driving, so Prentiss waited until he pulled his van off near the bottom of the curve.

There'd been no traffic on the two-lane for the last five miles. It was the middle of the night.

He took the cellular phone from the passenger seat and got out of the van. He crossed the highway.

There were rocks on the other side, and a cliff, below which the sea stretched, opulent with shadows, in the moonlight.

Pfump-shhss the waves went on the shore a long way down.

He sat on a rock and dialed Lizette's number.

Her machine told him to leave a message.

"The development is all right," he said. "Half the houses are sold already, and they're not even finished yet. . . ."

Lizette's voice cut in. "Prentiss? Is that you?"

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"Yours is finished, though, so *you* can move in whenever you want."

"Wonderful!"

"Who're you with, byu the way?" he said.

She didn't answer him.

"It doesn't matter, Lizette. I've left my share of the development to you in my will."

He expected her to be shocked at this intimation of his death.

"I love you," was her response.

"No you don't."

"How can you say that?"

"It takes a long time, sometimes, to realize what one is sick of."

"Sick? What nonsense."

"I'm sick of making money. I'm sick of collecting art."

"I thought you liked it."

He thought of the naive paintings that filled his house. Especially the eerie Slavic ones, with their neurotically detailed forests, the snow among the trees, the chalky moon above them, the people who looked like thumbs gathered around a coffin in a clearing. He loved these irrational paintings. he wished hw could paint like that. He wished he could paint at all.

Lizette could. She'd been his teacher in one of the innumerable figure drawing and painting classes he'd never finished in night school.

Lizette's paintings were smooth and cunning. if geometry could be cunning. No wonder she was good at math, especially the math of money. Her favorite color was a kind of grayish beige. This reminded him of the color of his dreams. This, and the fact that he loved her, made him forget that he hated her paintings.

He wanted to say, I'm really sick of collecting art I can't do. I'm sick of your greed. I'm sick of your ice heart," but he couldn't.

"Prentiss?"

"What?"

"Let's have lunch tomorrow."

He thought, there won't be a tomorrow for me. Not with so many black yesterdays.

"We can talk about this will business. I don't believe you, you know."

There — that laugh of hers again, that made his head swim with desire.

But she had never taken his love seriously, let alone his gloominess. She was fond of saying, "You're the only person I know whose wealth depresses

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him."

He'd answer, "All a lot of money does is buy boredom. And bribe people. Can it bribe death? Can it make tomorrow mysterious?"

And she'd laugh, and they'd make love, and he'd wake up nowhere but in the wake of her schedule, her self-interest.

"Prentiss? Lunch?"

"No. Good-bye, Lizette."

And with that he threw, along with his phone, two years of Lizette — two years of hopeless hope — and ten years of piling up money and confusion, over the cliff.

It was time to throw himself over as well.

A truck horn blatted behind him. He turned and saw the truck speeding down the hill. if it weren't for the moon, he might not have seen the truck at all, for its lights were out. As it neared him, he heard it gearing down and its hydraulics let out a steamy pop. As it passed him, something large fell out the back and clunked on the road.

He was too surprised to shout at the truck, even as it slowed, groaning up the far side of the curve.

He peered at what had fallen out of it. It looked like a coffin.

He went over to it.

It was a coffin. And the top half of its lid was ajar.

An old man's voice came out of it. "Don't leave me here."

Prentiss backed toward his van. He got his flashlight from the glove compartment and shone it on the coffin.

"Don't leave me here."

Part of Prentiss said, "Drive away." Another part said, "If there was any doubt before, there's none now. You've lost your mind. Jump off the cliff." A third part said, "Take a look."

He obeyed the last suggestion. But carefully.

He opened the lid all the way.

His flashlight told him the man nestled in the tufted white material inside was mostly bald and had a blue suit and bow tie on. Like the bodies he'd seen before at funerals, this one's eyeballs bulged under their lids and one hand was lying on top of the other on the belly. The difference was that the lips were slightly apart, and though they didn't move, the voice came from them.

"Are you deaf? Move me."

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Prentiss slammed the lid shut. He stood there in a vertigo of uncertainty.

Then he put the flashlight in his pocket and dragged the coffin to the side of the road behind his van.

What now?

The lid popped open of its own accord. He jumped.

The voice hit him. "I will miss the ferry if you do not help me."

"What?"

"You have a truck?"

Prentiss loosened his throat. "A van."

"Put me in it."

"This isn't happening."

"My English is good. You understand me."

"No I don't."

"If I miss the ferry, I will be abandoned here like most of the other dead. Would you like that to happen to you?"

Prentiss thought, What difference does it make? To be abandoned on the seafloor?

"Young man," the voice said, "because you think this is impossible does not mean it is. Because it is interesting does not mean it is a dream. If you will kindly put my coffin in your van, I will tell you where to drive me and what is going on. I only have one chance to make the ferry, and the time is short."

This speech from a dead man made Prentiss feel that he had turned into ice. "Who are you?"

"Vaclav Menken."

"The painter? How can that be? He died in. . . ."

"1956."

"But. . . ."

"The ferry comes once every fifty years. Now, please. . . ."

"I have three of your paintings."

"Which ones?"

"*Snow and Brambles, The Moon Horse* and *Forest Burial.*"

"Ah, those are good ones. i commend your taste. But we are wasting time. Please."

Prentiss didn't know how he managed to get the coffin into the back of his van, except that it was lighter than he expected.

When he was behind the wheel, he heard Menken say, "Follow the

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truck. In a few miles you will come to a blue light. There you must turn left."

"What do I do then?"

"I will tell you when we get there."

On the way, Vaclav Menken explained himself. He said he emigrated to Oregon after the War, which Prentiss already knew. he also knew that Menken had died of a heart attack, but not that this had been caused by homesickness. Nor did he know that Menken had a Gypsy mistress in Slovenia, who, before she and her family were robbed and deported to death by German fanatics, revealed to him the secret of the Black Ferry. Her name was Altaina.

This part of Menken's story drew blood from prentiss's soul, for it not only reminded him of his tragic luck with Lizette, but suggested that his sense of the word "tragic" was childish compared to Menken's. In fact, it preoccupied him so much for a time that he forgot to ask teh dead old man about the Black Ferry.

Then he saw the blue light. It was actually a blue flare, smoking on the left side of the highway. He turned onto a narrow road.

Menken interrupted himself. "When you see the truck, stop behind it."

"What were you saying?"

"I was saying that nothing I painted in this country came out well. I was good at languages, so I learned English quickly. But my painting — ah, that is what my homesickness was about. There was mystery in the landscape, but the trees were too big and it rained too much. There was mystery in the people, but they were not small and earthy and superstitious enough. They believed too much in machines and money. Do you understand me?"

Prentiss choked sadkly on the words, but he said, "Yes . . . yes."

"And so I died."

"Why didn't you go back?"

"because it had become too much like this country. Much poorer, yes, but joyless and monumental. Absurdity had lost its rich flavor, and excitement its eerie terror."

Prentiss felt like weeping. It was as though the old painter had translated his own feelings into a langauage he couldn't speak but understood.

"At least my daughter Rhonda was with me. I did manage to save her when her mother was taken. Actually, her mother knew what was coming and made me take our daughter before 8it did. Truly, without Rhonda, I

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would not have been able to look forward to the Black Ferry."

Just then, Prentiss saw blue lights ahead. Shortly thereafter, his headlights revealed the truck. He stopped the van behind it with a jerk.

"Are we there?"

Prentiss wet his lips with his tongue. "I think so."

"Are the coffins still in the truck?"

"They're being unloaded."

"Ah."

"By monks, it looks like. Black habits, with the hoods up. Who are they?"

"So, Altaina was right." Menken let out an old man's giggle. "Well, it is the ferry crew."

"Who's the ferryman, if there is one?"

"There is. He is called Muté."

"What do I do now?"

"Turn your lights off and come back here."

Prentiss did as he was told. As he squatted beside the coffin, he kept his eyes on the blue lights. Gradually he could make out the toll bar they lined, like astring of Christmas tree lights. The toll bar was up, and two of the hooded figures were carrying a coffin into the darkness beyond it.

Menken spoke. "There is a coin in my breast pocket. Take it out."

Prentiss hesitated.

"Go on. Have you ever touched a dead body before?"

He had. When he was in the eighth grade, his classmate Dolores Kiley's father had died, and when noi one was looking, Prentiss had touched the corpse's hand in the funeral parlor. At least now he didn't have to touch skin. "Yes," and he put his fingers in Menken's pocket.

The coin he pulled out was a little bigger than a silver dollar, and thicker. It was heavy, and there was some kind of inscription on it, but he couldn't see it clearly.

Menken told him then that his daughter Rhonda had put it in his pocket before his coffin was locked up in its mausoleum. "It is much easier for the ferryman's crew to fetch a coffin from a mausoleum, you see, than to dig it up, though Altaina told me they will do that, too, if they must. As long as the dead have their fare. Now, give it to the ferryman."

"How will I know him?"

"You will know. Return before they come for me. I want to tell you something."

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Prentiss climbed out of the van, leaving, it seemed, his heart and his breath behind him.

He edged past the ferryman's crew as they worked, past the truck, the toll bar. He saw a squat figure in a ragged cloak and hood the color of motor oil in the moonlight, standing to one side on a broad dock.

Was this the ferryman? His face was hidden inside the hood, and he smelled of seaweed.

As Prentiss approached, his shoes felt like there were wet stones in them.

The figure held out his fist. It looked like it was made of black slugs.

"Mr. Muté?"

The ferryman opened his hand. Prentiss laid the coin in it, which the ferryman put inside his cloak, where it clinked, as though against other coins.

As Prentiss backed away, he made out the rear of the ferry. It was wide, like ferries he'd seen before, only it was black and there seemed to be no pilot house. The coffins he could see were arranged elbow to elbow, so to speak, in a row across the deck.

He went back to the van.

In his papery voice, Vaclav Menken was singing a tune in Czech. That's what he told Prentiss when he stopped. "Are they coming?"

"Not yet."

Menken was silent for a few moments. Prentiss was kneeling beside the coffin, silent himself, waiting for Menken to speak.

"You have saved me," said Menken. "I am grateful."

"What did I save you *for*?"

"For a place other than nothing. I will not know what it really is until I arrive there. It will not have space as I know it, or you do, and none of the time such space expresses itself by. What artists usually mean by perspective and composition, even color — well, I was never like such artists to begin with. They called my work naive, but I sensed something through it — perhaps a dwarfish mystery in things that like to peek out at you and wink at you, and make faces. But one must look, imagine, sometimes lure it with one's hands. One must belong somewhere, and be saturated by it, for this to happen. I think I am going to a new place like that."

This long, nostalgic monologue seeped into Prentiss's soul. He knew his belief in what he heard was beyond question.

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"What do you want, young man?"

"I want to paint. I want a coin like yours."

Menken sighed, then laughed. A laugh like fire crinkling though tiny sticks.

Then he spoke again. "Altaina told me someone like you would come. I thought it would happen while I was still alive. How foolish of me."

Two of the ferryman's crew were approaching the van now. Prentiss caught his breath.

Menken said, "Rhonda will give you what you need."

"Talent?"

"That you already have."

"How do you know that?"

"Do you think I spent seventy years of life, and thirty-five of death, without being able to sense such things? My daughter will teach you, as I taught her. She lives in Asunción."

"You know that, too?"

"Young man, you must believe that the daughter of a painter like me and a Gypsy like Altaina has powers. It may have been forbidden for her to witness my last journey, but she has not been silent or inattentive."

The pallbearers now stood behind the van.

"Go to her," Menken said. "She is no longer young, but she has not forgotten you ae coming."

"Me?"

"Now leave your van. You will have to walk back. Perhaps we will meet each other again. Go."

Prentiss stood beside the van as the eerie pallbearers carried Vaclav Menken's coffin, closed now, past him. "Thank you," Prentiss whispered. "Thank you."

He added, "Safe journey," and waved as the coffin took its place with the others on the Black Ferry's deck, for he had followed it as far as the toll bar.

The ferryman was gone.

The moon didn't prevent the ferry from diminishing into blackness soon after it pulled away from the dock, silently and with only a trace of foam in its wake.

And then everything else was gone — the toll bar, the dock, the truck, the van — and Prentiss found himself standing on a bluff above the sea, among dune grass chittering in the wind and moonlight.

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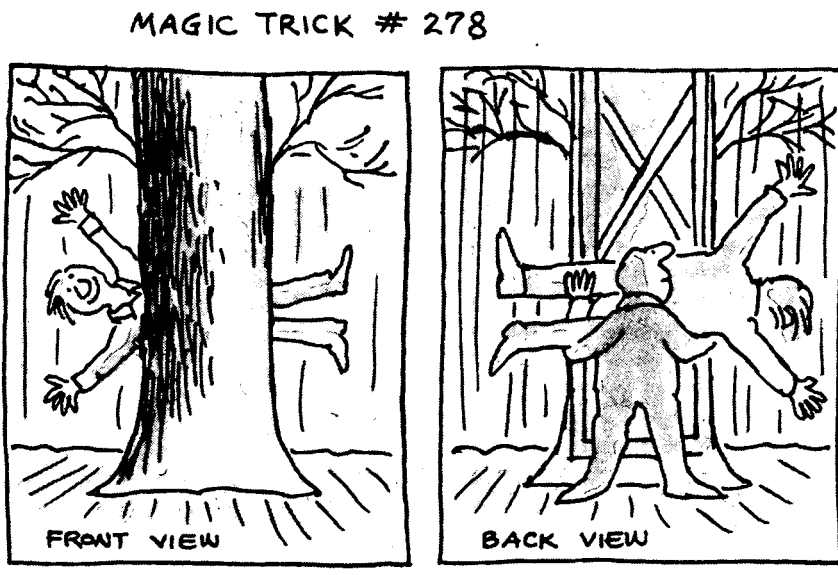
Prentiss waved once again, then trudged back toward the highway. He smiled, for the will in which he'd left everything to Lizette in a furious burst of irony had been in the glove compartment of the van.

His walk was long and lonely, but not, strangely, exhausting, and by the time he reached a gas station, the sky in the east was beginning to turn the kind of sensuous red orange that lined the horizon in Vaclav Menken's painting *Forest Burial*.

Prentiss went straight to the pay phone, inserted a coin, and, with his phone card in hand, began his quest for the aging woman in Asunción.


MAGIC TRICK # 278
FRONT VIEW
BACK VIEW
EFFECT:
A MAN APPEARS TO HAVE BEEN BLOWN THROUGH A TREE TRUNK BY A HURRICANE.
HOW IT IS DONE:
TWO MEN ARE NEEDED TO PERFORM THIS TRICK. BEFORE CURTAIN RISES THE SECOND MAN, HIDING BEHIND THE TREE, LIFTS AND HOLDS THE OTHER MAN IN PLACE.

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SCIENCE

BRUCE STERLING

SUPERGLUE

THIS IS the Golden Age of Glue.

For thousands of years, humanity got by with natural glues like pitch, resin, wax, and blood; products of hoof and hide and treesap and tar. But during the past century, and especially during the past thirty years, there has been a silent revolution in adhesion.

This stealthy yet steady technological improvement has been difficult to fully comprehend, for glue is a humble stuff, and the better it works, the harder it is to notice. Nevertheless, much of the basic character of our everyday environment is now due to advanced adhesion chemistry.

Many popular artifacts from the pre-glue epoch look clunky and almost Victorian today. These creations relied on bolts, nuts, rivets, pins, staples, nails, screws, stitches, straps, bevels, knobs, and bent flaps of tin. No more. The popular demand for consumer objects ever lighter, smaller, cheaper, faster and sleeker has led to great changes in the design of everyday things.

Glue determines much of the difference between our grandparent's shoes, with their sturdy leather soles, elaborate stitching and cobbler's nails, and the eerie-looking modern jogging-shoe with its laminated plastic soles, fabric uppers and sleek foam inlays. Glue also makes much of the difference between the big family radio cabinet of the 1940s and the sleek black hand-sized clamshell of a modern Sony Walkman.

Glue holds this very magazine together. And if you happen to be reading this article off a computer (as you well may), then you are even more indebted to glue; modern microelectronic assembly would be impossible without it.

Glue dominates the modern packaging industry. Glue also has a strong presence in automobiles, aerospace, electronics, dentistry, medicine, and household appliances of all kinds. Glue infiltrates grocery

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bags, envelopes, books, magazines, labels, paper cups, and cardboard boxes; there are five different kinds of glue in a common filtered cigarette. Glue lurks invisibly in the structure of our shelters, in ceramic tiling, carpets, counter tops, gutters, wall siding, ceiling panels and floor linoleum. It's in furniture, cooking utensils, and cosmetics. This galaxy of applications doesn't even count the vast modern spooling mileage of adhesive tapes: package tape, industrial tape, surgical tape, masking tape, electrical tape, duct tape, plumbing tape, and much, much more.

Glue is a major industrial industry and has been growing at twice the rate of GNP for many years, as adhesives leak and stick into areas formerly dominated by other fasteners. Glues also create new markets all their own, such as Post-it Notes (first premiered in April 1980, and now omnipresent in over 350 varieties).

The global glue industry is estimated to produce about twelve billion pounds of adhesives every year. Adhesion is a $13 billion market in which every major national economy has a stake. The adhesives industry has its own specialty magazines, such as *Adhesives Age* and *SAMPE Journal*; its own trade groups, like the Adhesives Manufacturers Association, The Adhesion Society, and the Adhesives and Sealant Council; and its own seminars, workshops and technical conferences. Adhesives corporations like 3M, National Starch, Eastman Kodak, Sumitomo, and Henkel are among the world's most potent technical industries.

Given all this, it's amazing how little is definitely known about how glue actually works — the actual science of adhesion. There are quite good industrial rules-of-thumb for creating glues; industrial technicians can now combine all kinds of arcane ingredients to design glues with well-defined specifications: qualities such as shear strength, green strength, tack, electrical conductivity, transparency, and impact resistance. But when it comes to actually describing why glue is sticky, it's a different matter, and a far from simple one.

A good glue has low surface tension; it spreads rapidly and thoroughly, so that it will wet the entire surface of the substrate. Good wetting is a key to strong adhesive bonds; bad wetting leads to problems like "starved joints," and crannies full of trapped air, moisture, or other atmospheric contaminants, which can weaken the bond.

But it is not enough just to wet a surface thoroughly; if that were the case, then water would be a glue. Liquid glue changes form; it cures,

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creating a solid interface between surfaces that becomes a permanent bond.

The exact nature of that bond is pretty much anybody's guess. There are no less than four major physicochemical theories about what makes things stick: mechanical theory, adsorption theory, electrostatic theory and diffusion theory. Perhaps molecular strands of glue become physically tangled and hooked around irregularities in the surface, seeping into microscopic pores and cracks. Or, glue molecules may be attracted by covalent bonds, or acid-base interactions, or exotic van der Waals forces and London dispersion forces, which have to do with arcane dipolar resonances between magnetically imbalanced molecules. Diffusion theorists favor the idea that glue actually blends into the top few hundred molecules of the contact surface.

Different glues and different substrates have very different chemical constituents. It's likely that all of these processes may have something to do with the nature of what we call "stickiness" — that everybody's right, only in different ways and under different circumstances.

In 1989 the National Science Foundation formally established the Center for Polymeric Adhesives and Composites. This Center's charter is to establish "a coherent philosophy and systematic methodology for the creation of new and advanced polymeric adhesives" — in other words, to bring genuine detailed scientific understanding to a process hitherto dominated by industrial rules of thumb. The Center has been inventing new adhesion test methods involving vacuum ovens, interferometers, and infrared microscopes, and is establishing computer models of the adhesion process. The Center's corporate sponsors — Amoco, Boeing, DuPont, Exxon, Hoechst Celanese, IBM, Monsanto, Philips, and Shell, to name a few of them — are wishing them all the best.

We can study the basics of glue through examining one typical candidate. Let's examine one well-known superstar of modern adhesion: that wondrous and well-nigh legendary substance known as "superglue." Superglue, which also travels under the aliases of SuperBonder, Permabond, Pronto, Black Max, Alpha Ace, Krazy Glue and (in Mexico) Kola Loka, is known to chemists as cyanoacrylate ($C_5H_5NO_2$).

Cyanoacrylate was first discovered in 1942 in a search for materials to make clear plastic gunsights for the second world war. The American researchers quickly rejected cyanoacrylate because the wretched stuff stuck to everything and made a

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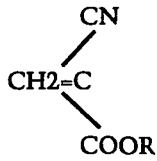
horrible mess. In 1951, cyanoacrylate was rediscovered by Eastman Kodak researchers Harry Coover and Fred Joyner, who ruined a perfectly useful refractometer with it — and then recognized its true potential. Cyanoacrylate became known as Eastman compound #910. Eastman 910 first captured the popular imagination in 1958, when Dr. Coover appeared on the "I've Got a Secret" TV game show and lifted host Gary Moore off the floor with a single drop of the stuff.

This stunt still makes very good television and cyanoacrylate now has a yearly commercial market of $325 million.

Cyanoacrylate is an especially lovely and appealing glue, because it is (relatively) nontoxic, very fast-acting, extremely strong, needs no other mixer or catalyst, sticks with a gentle touch, and does not require any fancy industrial gizmos such as ovens, presses, vices, clamps, or autoclaves. Actually, cyanoacrylate does require a chemical trigger to cause it to set, but with amazing convenience, that trigger is the hydroxyl ions in common water. And under natural atmospheric conditions, a thin layer of water is naturally present on almost any surface one might want to glue.

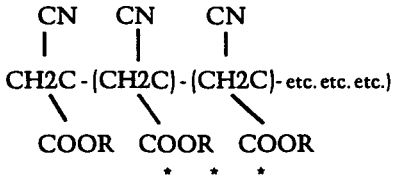
Cyanoacrylate is a "thermosetting adhesive," which means that (unlike sealing wax, pitch, and other "hot melt" adhesives) it cannot be heated and softened repeatedly. As it cures and sets, cyanoacrylate becomes permanently crosslinked, forming a tough and permanent polymer plastic.

In its natural state in its native Superglue tube from the convenience store, a molecule of cyanoacrylate looks something like this:



The R is a variable (an "alkyl group") which slightly changes the character of the molecule, cyanoacrylate is commercially available in ethyl, methyl, isopropyl, allyl, butyl, isobutyl, methoxyethyl, and ethoxyethyl cyanoacrylate esters. These chemical variants have slightly different setting properties and degrees of gooiness.

After setting or "ionic polymerization," however, Superglue looks something like this:



The single cyanoacrylate "monomer" joins up like a series of plastic

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popper-beads, becoming a long chain. Within the thickening liquid glue, these growing chains whip about through Brownian motion, a process technically known as "reptation," named after the crawling of snakes. As the reptating molecules thrash, then wriggle, then finally merely twitch, the once-thin and viscous liquid becomes a tough mass of fossilized, interpenetrating plastic molecular spaghetti.

And it is strong. Even pure cyanoacrylate can lift a ton with a single square-inch bond, and one advanced elastomer-modified '80s mix, "Black Max" from Loctite Corporation, can go up to 3,100 pounds. This is enough strength to rip the surface right off most substrates. Unless it's made of chrome steel, the object you're gluing will likely give up the ghost well before a properly anchored layer of Superglue will.

Superglue quickly found industrial uses in automotive trim, phonographic needle cartridges, video cassettes, transformer laminations, circuit boards, and sporting goods. But early superglues had definite drawbacks. The stuff dispersed so easily that it sometimes precipitated as vapor, forming a white film on surfaces where it wasn't needed; this is known as "blooming." Though extremely strong under tension, superglue was not very good at sudden lateral shocks or "shear forces," which could cause the glue-bond to snap. Moisture weakened it, especially on metal-to-metal bonds, and prolonged exposure to heat would cook all the strength out of it.

The stuff also coagulated inside the tube with annoying speed, turning into a useless and frustrating plastic lump that no amount of squeezing or pinpoking could budge — until the tube burst and the thin slippery gush cemented one's fingers, hair, and desk in a mummified membrane that only acetone could cut.

Today, however, through a quiet process of incremental improvement, superglue has become more potent and more useful than ever. Modern superglues are packaged with stabilizers and thickeners and catalysts and gels, improving heat capacity, reducing brittleness, improving resistance to damp and acids and alkalis. Today the wicked stuff is basically getting into everything.

Including people. In Europe, superglue is routinely used in surgery, actually gluing human flesh and viscera to replace sutures and hemostats. And Superglue is quite an old hand at attaching fake fingernails — a practice that has sometimes had grisly consequences when the tiny clear superglue bottle is mistaken for a bottle of eyedrops. (I haven't the heart to detail the consequences of this mishap, but if you're

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not squeamish you might try consulting *The Journal of the American Medical Association*, May 2, 1990 v263 n17 p2301).

Superglue is potent and almost magical stuff, the champion of popular glues and, in its own quiet way, something of an historical advent. There is something pleasantly marvelous, almost Arabian Nights-like, about a drop of liquid that can lift a ton; and yet one can buy the stuff anywhere today, and it's cheap. There are many urban legends about terrible things done with superglue; car-doors locked forever, parking meters welded into useless lumps, and various tales of sexual vengeance that are little better than elaborate dirty jokes. There are also persistent rumors of real-life superglue muggings, in which victims were attached spreadeagled to cars or plate-glass windows, while their glue-welding assailants rifle their pockets at leisure and then stroll off, leaving the victim helplessly immobilized.

While superglue crime is hard to document, there is no question about its real-life use for law enforcement. The detection of fingerprints has been revolutionized with special kits of fuming ethyl-gel cyanoacrylate. The fumes from a ripped-open foil packet of chemically smoking superglue will settle and cure on the skin oils left in human fingerprints, turning the smear into a visible solid object. Thanks to superglue, the lightest touch on a weapon can become a lump of plastic guilt, cementing the perpetrator to his crime in a permanent bond.

And surely it would be simple justice if the world's first convicted superglue mugger were apprehended in just this way.

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In the 1970s, E. M. Goldman sold three stories to F&SF under the name Maureen Exter. She took a hiatus from writing in 1979 and has come back with a bang. In addition to selling this story to F&SF, she has also sold a young adult novel to Delacourt. We hope to see much more of her work in the future.

Metastasis

By E. M. Goldman

DURING THE night Edna heard a sound like furniture being shifted in the living room downstairs. "Grant —" she murmured.

Her husband wasn't sleeping next to her. The bed felt icy beyond the area where he always said she radiated heat like a blast furnace. For whatever reason, Grant was rearranging the furniture at — she squinted at the clock through the darkness.

2:10

She settled back uneasily against her pillow. They'd been married thirty-four years. For the past two weeks Grant had been working through a difficult patch by doing God-only-knew-what to their perfectly satisfactory living room. His mysterious project took an inordinate amount of sawing and bumping and thumping, plus a recent visit from the PlantLand truck. He promised a surprise, soon. She'd drifted off rehearsing her

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enthusiastic response for the moment the sacrificial virgin was unveiled.

Grant was moody these days, but not in a way she could take personally. For him, early retirement was as bad as menopause had been for her. The analogy was an apt one. She'd been surgically relieved of her ovaries as abruptly as he'd been terminated from his job. Like so much deadwood. His retirement occurred all at once, without warning or by-your-leave, and he simply didn't know what to do with himself.

The scraping sounds stopped. Just as she was returning to sleep, their dog began to howl outside. Edna sat up. "Oh, for heaven's sake." She clicked on the lamp, then walked to the top of the stairs in her pajamas. "Grant!" she called. "Would you see what's bothering the dog?"

No reply. Fine. She returned to put on her plaid bathrobe, then slid her bare feet into well-worn slippers.

(She had a new robe, a gift from her daughter-in-law, but it was shiny and slick, in that tea-rose shade she loathed — ideal if she ever had to go back into the hospital. Her slippers, however, were ready for the Great Slipper Graveyard. She'd been angling with their grown children for a new pair for Mother's Day, meaning that she'd get three pairs or none.)

The dog continued to howl as she headed downstairs. She knew what had happened, of course. After Grant's nocturnal onslaughts against a living room he'd hardly noticed before, he'd fallen asleep on the couch.

She passed through the kitchen to open the side door. Rusty's mother was a wire-haired terrier with an unknown significant other. He ran in, trembling. "What on earth —" He headed toward the hallway, halted and began to whine. Edna grabbed him by the collar and he stopped. "Grant," she began, "I have no idea what's wrong with him. Do you know —"

She stopped at the sight of the unfamiliar shadow filling her living room and clutched the quivering dog as the hair rose on her arms.

Logic told her she was seeing a shadow from outside, an illusion cast by moonlight. The phantom image of a tree with bare branches had been thrown into their living room through the large front window. The tree stopped short of the circulating fan in the cathedral ceiling but blocked one skylight.

Grant was saying something she couldn't hear over Rusty's whining.

She jerked the dog's collar. "Grant, what did you say?"

Her husband's voice seemed hoarse. "Don't come in here. Not yet."

"I'll fill Rusty's water dish." She waited until the dog's license tag was

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clanking against the side of his bowl as he lapped thirstily.

"Stay in the hall another minute."

Oh, God, she thought. He's installed more damned bookcases.

He cleared his throat. "Edna, you've always been a good wife."

"I've always been a wonderful wife." She stifled a yawn. "And you haven't been a half-bad husband." For a man.

He was speaking again. "It's time for a change, you see."

Time for bed. "A trip," she said. "Mexico. Southern breezes." It was January, although mild.

"More of a change than that. But if you want to take a trip, don't let me —"

She sucked in her breath. "Grant? Is this your way of telling me — are you ill?" She rushed into the living room, barely missing careening into a low branch. She stared, appalled. "Oh, Grant, you haven't."

He'd cut a circular hole in the middle of the floor, added soil, and planted a tree. Cherry, perhaps. Surrounding the tree was a low wooden bench, the sort that readers occupied in public parks. With a sinking heart, she remembered the ghastly ordeal of refinishing the hardwood flooring when they first bought the house. Her hands had bled.

Then she noticed his clothes, neatly folded on the easy chair. Edna snapped on a lamp and looked at the tree more closely.

"You haven't planted a tree," she said at last. "You've *become* a tree." She'd taken classes in parenting skills, prided herself on remaining calm when provoked.

"Yes."

Not a young tree, she could see that. A mature tree, twice as tall as Grant was. Had been. His features seemed blurred in the dim lamplight. He looked like a tree would if a tree looked like her husband, or her husband if he looked like a tree.

The year wasn't far enough advanced for him to have leaves, but the promise was there. Near the top of his trunk she spotted an orifice of sorts through which he was speaking. Not a true tree yet, she thought hopefully as she moved closer to smooth the pitted bark on his trunk.

"You *are* a tree." Her words sounded ridiculous, as though she were humoring a child. "Yes, you are definitely a tree. Very treelike." The dog had come into the living room. "Rusty," she snapped, "stay away from him."

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She didn't have to tell the sniffing dog twice. He gave a sharp yelp, then returned to the kitchen. "You might have consulted me." She kept her tone even.

But he wasn't listening. "I thought — apple." Something filled his voice that she hadn't heard in ages. Excitement. "I've been so useless. And then — you remember that program we watched about the Amazon rain forests. I could create oxygen! Think of it, Edna. That's something I could do. Oxygen. And fruit."

She was thinking about it. "A double threat." Like being able to hit and pitch.

"I've been considering this for a while."

She'd never donate to public television again. "I've been thinking about having an affair with Sean Connery." Her voice was becoming shrill, but she didn't care. "But that has never meant — my God."

His tone was apologetic, placating. Unyielding. "It's really not a bad idea. You'll see."

Her probing fingers encountered an indentation on his trunk. She peered more closely. One night after they became engaged, he went out with some buddies. He returned with a terrible headache and a tattoo, a heart inscribed EDNA. Now it seemed etched into his side by a teenager's pocketknife.

She took a deep breath. "Grant, I want you to change back now. I want you as you were."

A breeze from an open window caught in his branches as though he were sighing. "Don't cry," he said. Was she crying? "We'll make a wonderful team. You'll exhale carbon dioxide, I'll use it and make oxygen that you can breathe."

He made it sound like a cottage industry. "And you'll grow apples," she added, "given a favorable spring and assuming that I invite bees into the house." Could a tree smile? She didn't know. "Grant, I'm going back to bed. You'll stay here or you won't. As you please."

His branches didn't even rustle in indecision as she climbed slowly back upstairs.

Of course she didn't sleep that night.

Their family doctor didn't normally make house calls, but he finally arrived the next afternoon. He examined Grant briefly. "If it's any conso-

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lation," he said to her afterward in the kitchen, "I believe he's a healthy tree, although you might wish to consult an expert. I think you should expect some adjustment problems."

"Adjustment problems?"

"He's in the living room. He's a tree. After all, you do have a backyard where he would more logically have gone before his . . . transformation. That may signal some ambivalence." He gave her the name of a psychotherapist.

"For me or for Grant?" she asked.

"Whoever."

EXCEPT DURING the holidays, they seldom corralled all three adult children together. Edna managed by stressing the words *important* and *not more than fifteen minutes*. Two more days passed. She asked them to enter through the den, rather than spring Grant on them at once.

"Your father is having adjustment problems," she began. She didn't believe her allotted period should be diminished by the time it took Brent, her youngest, to tell his sister she was putting on weight or Susan to retort that he was getting shorter. Of course, Nathaniel sat looking at his watch as though he expected it to be stolen from his wrist — his father's former habit.

Brant spoke first. "What kind of adjustment problems?"

"He hasn't known what to do with himself."

"A hobby." Nathaniel stood. "He needs outside interests."

Brent grinned. "You make it sound like Dad needs a girlfriend."

"No," Susan said primly, "that's you."

Edna didn't believe her younger son had difficulty finding girlfriends. The other two were married — happily, she hoped, Nathaniel for the second time. She cleared her throat. "Pardon me —"

Brent was looking around. "Speaking of Dad, where is he?"

"In the living room." Her headstrong son headed toward the door. "He's turned into a tree."

Brent whipped around so quickly that he almost fell. "He what?"

Wonderful. Now they were wondering about *her* sanity. She led the way, stopping in the hall.

Perhaps they would have been less stunned if Grant had been in leaf

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rather than appearing so bare. "This is a joke, right?" Brent asked. She couldn't blame him. Grant had never seemed the tree type.

"No joke," his father said.

"I don't want word of this to get to the bank." Nathaniel was an assistant bank manager. He looked as though he were choking on a particularly sizable deposit.

"That's quite enough from you," she snapped. "Remember, you're addressing your father." Susan was the only one who hadn't spoken. Edna turned toward her, hoping she wouldn't say anything hurtful. Their daughter was Grant's favorite. "Susan?"

"Oh, I believe it," she said at last. "Look at how he's taken up the whole center of the room. You or I would have at least stood at one side. That's Dad, all right."

Edna marveled at her daughter's calm acceptance.

Susan took a step forward, her face glowing. "So you've done it."

"I've done it."

Edna stared. "You knew he wanted to —"

Her daughter nodded. "He said that when he was younger, he wanted to be a forester. Then he realized he really wanted to be a tree. A mighty oak."

In that moment Edna felt a pang of jealousy for the special closeness her husband had with his only daughter. She was his wife. How could he possibly have a dream without telling her? Perhaps he had, and she hadn't listened. "He's an apple tree," she pointed out.

"People change," said Grant, who should know.

"What do you want us to do?" Nathaniel asked.

"Love him," Edna said. "Respect his decision. Respect both of us." Help me, she wanted to say.

At first no one breathed.

"Hi, Dad," Brent said finally, but his voice sounded weak.

"I can't help thinking it's my fault," Edna told the psychotherapist. "You see, he — Grant — when it first happened, he began following me around at home, making suggestions about my normal routine. I told him not to. Because he was getting on my nerves, you see."

"When he first became a tree. . . . I'm sorry?" The young woman looked confused.

"No, no, that was later. You see, Grant spent his entire life working for

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one company. There were mergers, and a German takeover, and the economy. Perhaps he should have known — the middle management is notoriously vulnerable. He assumed he was too valuable. They gave him early retirement, and he was cut loose."

"Rootless."

"Yes." Edna's eyes stung. "He wasn't at all prepared, and I was no help. I see that now. I've always thought ahead. I had things I planned to do after the children started school. I ran my fabric shop for eighteen years. Then I had plans for after I sold the shop." At a comfortable profit.

"Who owns this problem?" the woman asked softly.

Edna blinked. "Grant." She'd always looked around the next corner. She hadn't realized that Grant's life went forward without any corners.

"Well?"

"I'm his wife. We share a life."

"You each have a life."

Two lives? It was a revolutionary thought that she almost discarded, but not quite.

"Just a little off the top and around the sides," Edna instructed the woman from the interior-landscaping company. No, she didn't want Grant to look like a bonsai.

An aluminum ladder had taken up permanent-resident status in the room. After a month she'd added a third skylight, which necessitated moving the pictures to the den so they wouldn't fade in the strong sunlight. She joined an exercise club and a support group to help her deal with the situation. ("Dump him!" was one woman's enthusiastic advice. "Get out and start living!") She tried flirting with her insurance agent but became entirely unnerved when he flirted back.

A newspaper offered to feature her innovative interior decoration, but she refused. She also refused invitations from two talk shows to take part in group discussions with women whose husbands had turned into inanimate objects. She watched Oprah on the television in the den. "Stand by your man — can a good thing be taken too far?" The other husbands ran the gamut from a doormat to a 1957 Buick. None were trees or even bushes.

But she agreed with the women on the show, who stated that although the adjustments they made might seem peculiar, their marriages were better than many of their friends'.

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She and Susan took photographs of Grant when he got his leaves. Outside the other trees were blooming, but of course Grant had started late. The boys kept their distance as though their father's condition were contagious.

"Excuse me, miss." The girl pruning Grant came into the kitchen. She was of Chinese descent, with a great deal of long black hair. She looked uneasy. "See, there's this problem. The tree has a wound ."

Edna stared at her. "A wound?" How could she not have noticed? She hurried into the living room, then laughed in relief. "That's not an injury. It's his mouth — well, what he has for a mouth."

"I know. But, see, infections get in that way." She waited. "He's not looking so good."

Edna hadn't really examined him closely for a while, but now she did. The girl was right. Grant's leaves hid the fact that he had become pale and his branches drooped. He seldom spoke to her these days, not even to discuss the news. She assumed that he simply didn't have much to say. "What should I do?"

"Well," the girl said, "the hole should be sealed up."

"Sealed?" Edna felt faint. "Is that really necessary? He's inside the house, after all."

"Bacteria's getting in." The girl shrugged. "It's up to you."

She had to sit. "What would you do if he were your husband?"

"Me?" The girl's eyebrows disappeared into her long bangs. "I'm never going to get married. Well, maybe after I've done everything I want to."

From her expression, Edna deduced that the girl regarded marriage as she would a leg-hold trap. "No," Edna said gently, "it's not the sort of thing to be entered into lightly."

"There's this guy we call in sometimes. He can do it for you if you decide —"

"We'll talk it over," Edna promised.

"What shall I do, Grant?" She asked once they were alone. If he couldn't talk, there would be no communication between them. He'd be a tree for well and good. She hadn't felt so helpless since Susan contracted scarlet fever at four. "I'll get a second opinion, of course. But if you must be sealed —"

"You decide." His voice had become hoarse, as though he had a heavy

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cold. She'd noticed before, of course, but assumed it was part of his metamorphosis. Some of his leaves looked soft. "I know I was selfish to stay in the house. But I didn't want to leave you."

Nor could she envision life without him beside her in some form. She took a deep breath. "Oh, my dear, of course you must live."

Sealing Grant took very little time, leaving a dark ugly blotch of pitch at his side. Edna began sleeping on the couch with Rusty at her feet.

"It's like you're camping in here," Brent protested when he and Nathaniel next came to visit. "You always hated camping."

"People change," she replied. She knew that Grant was there, and he knew she was there, and that's what was important.

Nathaniel had picked up some literature from one of those -Anon organizations for the spouses of drinkers or gamblers. He brought her tracts with terms like "enabler" and "co-dependent."

"How do you even know that there's still anything of Dad left?" When Nathaniel was little, his face became red and blotchy when he was upset. He was like that now. "Mom, we're thinking about you. You have to do something, for your own sake. Consider putting him into a home."

"He is in a home. His own." She could say he was too old for a nursery. She didn't.

"You could let him pull himself out of it. Get tough."

She regarded him quizzically. "Nathaniel, are you proposing that I stop watering your father?" She'd found that Grant enjoyed those tree spikes advertised on TV, but she didn't mention that to her son.

"That's exactly what I'm saying. If he gets thirsty enough, he'll walk into the kitchen and get a drink."

Brent was strangely silent.

"Darling, whether you like it — whether I like it — your father really is a tree. After he's come this far, he isn't going to change back. I'm not sure that he can."

On his way out of the living room, Nathaniel tripped over Rusty's bone and fell flat. He fought off his brother's attempt to help him up.

"The fruit really doesn't fall from the tree," Edna said benignly. Grant's branches shook. Of course the boys didn't understand that their father was laughing.

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Grant had become a tree in January. In April everything ended with a lump.

Hers.

She'd had lumps and bumps before. Women were lumpy and bumpy, that was their nature. But this time the doctor didn't tell her what she wanted to hear, not at all.

She came into the house through the kitchen and headed directly upstairs to pack the tea-rose bathrobe.

"My dear," she said after she composed herself enough to come into the living room. "I'm going away for a while. I'll make arrangements for you and Rusty. You'll be well looked after." She'd need a house sitter since the windows had to be left open. "When I return —"

She stopped, then sat on the bench and leaned back against his trunk, closing her eyes. "Why do I always feel that I must protect you?"

No answer of course. He was hard, silent. Unyielding.

"Plainly speaking, I'm ill. Very ill." She allowed herself to feel bitter, for the first time. "I've been wondering . . . if I had left you rather than your job, would this have happened? Would you have changed so drastically?" She answered her own question. "Of course not — I've always been here for you." She brushed her tears away. "Don't pay any attention to me, I'm feeling sorry for myself. It will pass."

And so would she.

Something soft and white landed on her hands where they were folded in her lap. She looked up as more blossoms floated down.

Grant was in full flower. As she gazed through his branches, he resembled her wedding bouquet, glorious and vast. Petals soon carpeted the floor.

She was sad, and he had bloomed for her.

"Yes, my darling," she whispered. "Of course, I've always known. Thank you for reminding me."

After she made up her mind, it didn't take long to prepare. She put Rusty into a kennel (Susan had a yard and would surely take him). The instructions in her will were clear. She deliberately kept her last "real" conversations with the children light, not wishing to spoil anything. At the last, she left messages for them on their respective answering machines.

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That evening when Brent reached the house, his first thought was that his mother had left on every light. He took the spare key from the flower pot on the side porch — where any burglar would look first, they all knew that — and went inside. His mother's message had been peculiar, to say the least.

She couldn't mean *that*.

"Mom!" he called. Her car was in the garage, but Rusty hadn't come to greet him. "Hey, Mom."

Something moved in the hallway. Brent turned. Blinded, he flung his arm over his eyes. Light warmed his skin, then the sensation passed.

Cautiously he peered out. "Mom?" She was incandescent, her outline barely visible. He shook his head. "Don't do this to me. Not you too."

On the kitchen table, he spotted an envelope with his name. In the first sentences of his mother's letter, she wrote of lifelong love and devotion and fertilizer and bees.

"Mom, damn it, I won't let you —" As though he could stop her. His hands passed through her shoulders as she shimmered. His mother leaped from the floor, though his father's branches toward the center skylight. Dust motes danced through her as she shone down upon her husband.

"Okay" Brent was breathing hard. Okay, Mom. I don't understand, but . . . Okay" He reached for the phone and called his brother. "Nate, Mom's turned into a ray of sunshine."

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Linda Nagata is a part time writer and the mother of two young children. Her work has previously appeared in Analog. *"Liberator" is set in the same world as her novel,* Hands of Love, *which is currently making the rounds to publishers. "'Liberator,'" she writes, "came about partly as a response to the literary trick of slaughtering a protagonist's family or severing his social obligations to free him to be a hero. (*Star Wars *is a classic example of this technique.) I had to wonder: what if a protagonist weren't so conveniently free to respond to the bad guys! What if more immediate moral obligations prevented her from acting!" The result is a stunning science fiction novellette with an unusual twist.*

Liberator

By Linda Nagata

ALONE IN HER DARKened bedroom, Hanan took a few furtive minutes to compose a ghost copy of herself. The task was automated. She had only to initiate it, and an electronic copy of her persona would be drawn from her brain by the billion threads of the atrium that grew through her neural tissue.

Now you'll be free, her mother's voice seemed to whisper from out of the distant past.

But the freedom belonged to the ghost, not to Hanan.

Still, this simulation of her consciousness was both accurate and self-aware. She thought of it as a second self. It could travel where she could not, and when it returned, its memories would become her own.

She rocked slowly in the recliner while the ghost took shape, listening

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cautiously for the sound of Seyyed's footsteps on the carpet outside her open door.

A high-pitched chirping distracted her. It arose from behind the dresser and was immediately followed by a dry rustle. Hanan tensed. The little secret one must be very hungry to make such noise. She issued a quick electronic signal through the atrium, and immediately the tiny bat sprang from its lair behind the dresser and shot across the room, tumbling into her lap. She picked it up carefully, its claws sharp against her skin as it sought a hold of its own.

I've hurt no one, Hanan thought, stroking the enhanced bat's soft black fur. She'd had the creature smuggled into the country years ago inside a food shipment bound for the impoverished children in the Ovens District. Its body was small enough to fit easily against her palm. She cradled it in her hands, fascinated by the unrelieved homeliness of the creature. With tiny eyes half-hidden under a heavy brow, its features seemed compressed into a perpetually sad expression. Its ears looked rumpled, its snout too heavy, its nostrils oddly like a dog's.

Her atrium alerted her: the ghost was complete. So she signaled the bat to make ready to receive it, then she downloaded the substitute persona from her atrium into its. Now she existed both inside and outside the bat as two separate and independent entities, two diverging minds.

But as always, she found it difficult to let the other go, to fully trust the ghost to do as she would do (though it was herself). So she hesitated, stroking the bat, running her fingers along a thin bone near the base of one wing until she felt the nodule, the suicide device implanted by the off-world corporation that had assembled this creature. If the bat were ever discovered, the atrium would signal the nodule to burst, spilling a self-motile poison into the bat's bloodstream. Within a second and a half, the poison would migrate to the brain, destroying the tissue there and erasing all evidence of the atrium and the ghost.

Reassured by this hard lump beneath her fingertip, Hanan stood, the tiny creature still in her hands, and walked to the doorway that opened onto the veranda. Lifting aside the gauzy curtain, she released the bat. It leaped from her hold and disappeared into the dark.

"Hanan?"

She turned swiftly, to see Seyyed in the other doorway. "Oh! You startled me. I was . . . thinking."

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He smiled tenderly and came to her. "About what? Not Uncle, I hope."

She shivered. "Not Uncle, no. I've had enough of Uncle for one day."

He touched her cheek. "But you're worried."

She smiled teasingly, knowing from long practice how to distract him. "So make me unworried."

He grinned, and accepted the challenge.

Later, though, sleep wouldn't come. Seyyed's ministrations had failed to banish her brittle mood, and she lay in the dark, listening to his soft breathing and remembering the day just past, as if she could draw some benefit from its casually demeaning events if only she were to see things in the right light. . . .

She'd been in her study, carefully explaining her instructions to the manservant: "There's a tiny hotel next to the fireworks factory in the Ovens District. An orphaned girl lives in a lean-to in the back — ten or twelve years old, she works in the hotel as a maid and has five younger siblings in her care. Gather them all up and escort them to Sister Maria's school. The nuns have made a place for them."

"Yes, ma'am."

"As always, you mustn't identify me."

"I understand, ma'am."

It was then that she noticed her daughter, Sari, standing forlornly in the doorway. She dismissed the manservant and called Sari in. "Darling, what's the matter?"

Sari ran to her, snuggling into her open arms. "Mama, why is Uncle here?" she asked plaintively. "He scares me."

"Hush, darling," Hanan whispered. "He's here to see Daddy; that's all. They have business. And you shouldn't be afraid of Uncle. He loves you."

"Then why are *you* afraid of him, Mama?"

Hanan glanced through the study's open doorway. She could see straight through the sitting room to the veranda beyond, where Seyyed chatted with Uncle beneath the mist roof that sheltered the mansion's enclosed courtyard. Seyyed could be companionable with anyone, even a beast like Uncle. "Uncle loves you," Hanan insisted. "And me, too. You must remember that family is more important to him than anything."

"But I can never please him! When I served him juice, he only told me to walk more softly, and set the glass down more carefully, and to stop

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trying to fix my hair myself — he said it's ugly, and I should let you do it." Her wide, dark eyes finally spilled tears across her brown cheeks.

Hanan's heart began to burn. Why did Uncle come here if he could only find fault with her family? Why had he always been such a hateful man? But she wiped Sari's tears away, saying: "Uncle just wants you to be the very best young woman you can be, so that you'll reflect well upon your family. Now go. Find your brother. He must come say hello, or Uncle will be so insulted, he may never come to visit us again!"

The jest drew a crooked little smile from Sari. *"If only it were that easy!"* she whispered. Then she ran off to the playroom to look for Hamal.

Hanan straightened. Turning, she looked once more to the veranda, only to find Uncle's stern gaze fixed upon her. For a moment, she panicked. Had he heard Sari? But no. He smiled and beckoned to her. Obediently, she left the study, her bare feet silent on the plush, patterned carpets, her narrow silk skirt sliding softly against her legs.

"Ah, Hanan," Uncle said, with a smile like a shark. "Come join us. Seyyed tells me you've found places for three more families amongst the charitable schools."

"Yes," Hanan said, accepting a proffered seat. "And one more just today. But there's so little room available, and so many deserving."

"Probably not so many as you think," Uncle said, leaning back in his chair, his fingers laced over a satisfied belly. "If the slum dwellers had the intellect to appreciate a better life, the president would build schools in the Ovens and educate everyone. Of course, that *was* tried before, wasn't it?"

Hanan lowered her gaze, responding in the docile way that kept her safe before this man. "Yes, Uncle." But in the polished silver sides of the coffee service, she thought she caught a glimpse of her mother's face, the wide, dark eyes fixed on her in unflinching accusation. Hanan shivered. Anna Soukotta had been dead for thirteen years.

Uncle turned to Seyyed. "Can you imagine trying to build a school in the Ovens?" he said. "We'd have to provide a nursery for the twelve-year-olds to drop off their children." He chuckled at the image, while Seyyed said something innocuous, his cool, dark eyes vaguely uncomfortable.

Hanan stole another glimpse at the reflecting silver, but this time she saw only an image of herself. Hanan-the-Perfect, she thought mockingly, a woman with unusually fair skin, full lips, and balanced features, her con-

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duct always gracious and dignified, her philanthropy well known, a doting mother of two, the loving wife of a successful businessman, niece of the chief of secret police, loyal servant of the state. That was how the world saw her. In her own mind, it was a different picture: Hanan-the-Imposter, the Fraud who lived every day in dreadful fear that she would be exposed.

Nervously, she searched the image. *You can't see it,* she thought. There was no outward sign of the atrium, and no one had ever guessed at its existence, not even Seyyed. Yet it was there just the same. A bioelectronic portal inside her brain that could put her in touch with the world net if only she dared to use it for that. An extra sense organ that would let her host guests in electronic copy, except that she would never risk having anyone there. The atrium had been designed by foreigners and implanted in her by her mother when she was a child. *Now you'll be free,* Anna Soukotta had always insisted. But the atrium was illegal, and Hanan knew it for a lethal defect that would kill her someday as surely as an aneurysm brooding in the brain of an old woman.

Anna Soukotta had dismissed such concerns. She'd brazenly pursued her political agenda, campaigning in the slums for universal education, decrying government censorship, and collecting enemies like other women collected perfume. Uncle had ordered his younger brother to divorce her. He'd refused.

But Uncle wasn't a man to be disobeyed. Even after twenty-four years, Hanan could still remember the scent and the sound of panic at Anna Soukotta's last political rally as government troops began firing into the crowd. And the officer, faceless behind his riot shield, who'd dragged her screaming away from the security of her father's arms moments before a fusillade of bullets tore through him.

To Uncle, nothing was more important than family . . . except the family's reputation. Given a reason, he'd sacrifice Hanan just as easily as he'd sacrificed her father.

Seyyed touched her hand, and she jumped, "Hanan, Uncle is speaking to you."

"Where is your son?" Uncle repeated, his voice sharp with nascent suspicion. "Seyyed tells me he made a perfect score on his latest math test, and I wanted to congratulate him."

Hanan flushed. "My apologies, Uncle. When Hamal studies, the rest of the world is nothing to him. Sari has gone to fetch him."

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Uncle's lips turned in a cold smile. "Ah yes. Hamal's a smart boy. He'll be on the president's staff someday."

"Yes, Uncle."

Yes, Uncle. Yes, Uncle: her angry thoughts mocked the meaningless chant. She'd die before she'd allow Uncle to turn sweet Hamal into one of his protégés.

Her gaze wandered beyond the veranda railing and up, to the courtyard's translucent "ceiling" — a cloud of mist sprayed by nozzles placed around the rectangular roofline. As the mist evaporated, it cooled the air so that the courtyard remained comfortable even while the city outside baked under cloudless skies.

Footsteps hammered on the courtyard's tiled path. "Hello, Uncle!" Hamal shouted as he ran amongst the ferns and carefully tended flowers.

"Hello there, young man!" Uncle turned to Hanan, his teeth bared in satisfaction. "Why do you always look so worried?" he demanded. "The boy pleases me. You've been a good mother."

"A good mother?" Seyyed echoed. "Other women are simply good mothers. Hanan is an angel. Her children are her life." And he gave her a quick wink, to let her know the pride he felt in her.

THE GHOST of Hanan rode the little bat to Hell. The journey was short — just over a kilometer — but then, Hell had established many franchises upon the Earth during the long history of humankind. Along the way the bat followed an erratic flight path as it hunted mosquitoes and moths, its sonar picking their tiny shapes out of the night sky. Hanan's disembodied ghost let it feed, though she cut off the line of raw sensory data that brought her the sonar images. She preferred the darting, dancing infrared picture of the city captured through the bat's artificial eyes. Once the bat had eaten a good meal, she took control of its volition through its behavioral-modification net.

The bat had been equipped with a very fine system of scent discrimination. Hanan's ghost used this now to locate the girl who'd lived behind the hotel, calling up the child's individual scent pattern from her atrium's library. She guided the creature along the edge of the slums. Even here, beyond the zone of official poverty, the streets were clogged with temporary shelters, tents and tarps and cardboard boxes that the government permitted to exist only between ten at night and five in the morning,

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when they must be removed to make way for the day's business traffic.

So many people! Their numbers still overwhelmed Hanan. How could so many survive such terrible conditions for so long? There was never enough food or water. Disease was rampant, and parents rarely lived long enough to instruct their children, so that each generation was forced to create a culture anew . . . a faint and diminishing echo of the once increscent and intricate past.

The bat caught a whiff of the programmed scent. It stalled and dived, pursuing the trail. Hanan was startled to see that she was already over Sister Maria's school. She pulled the bat off the scent. It wasn't necessary for her to see the child again; it was enough to know that she was under Sister Maria's care. There were others to think of now.

Hanan turned the bat toward the heart of the Ovens and hunted them out, one by one: the children she'd come to think of as her wards. She'd call them out of the slums only when she could secure a place for them in one of the schools or missions that took in homeless children. Until then, she would only watch. Anna Soukatta had proved the futility of trying to improve conditions on the inside. Her benign social movement had boiled into riot. Her political campaigns had become rites of murder. She herself had finally been assassinated in exile.

Dawn was near by the time Hanan's ghost left the last of her children. The bat was exhausted. The time had come to go home. She fed her own scent profile to the bat, then turned it toward the affluent heart of the city. But it struggled against her lead. It turned back toward the Ovens. She felt a stab of concern — the bat had never disobeyed her before. Then real fear brushed her as she realized that the bat *was* obedient. It had already found her scent trail. In the Ovens. At night.

This was impossible. She must be asleep in her bedroom, in the distant heart of the city. And yet, in the riot of molecular data that filled the night, one trail burned clear. It was the scent of herself.

She gave the bat its head. It fluttered swiftly through the slum, unnoticed by the weary squatters who were already rolling up their shacks in anticipation of the dawn. The scent trail grew stronger. She could no longer doubt that her true self had come to this ghastly place. But why? Only her charity reached here. Never herself or anyone in her family.

The eastern sky had begun to lighten when she saw a large building looming just ahead. The structure seemed out-of-place in this ramshackle

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neighborhood, too new and too well tended. The bat wheeled over the building's high wall and dove into a shadowed courtyard. Sonar filled the dark spaces with smudges of vegetation and the lightning gold streaks of startled insects. The bat alighted on a reed shade that covered a dark window. The shade rattled briefly. No light glinted through its slats; the room beyond was dark. Yet she could hear voices. Female voices speaking soft good-mornings. The Hanan scent trail was very strong.

The ghost suffered a mental shudder. What circumstance had brought her true self here? Had she been the victim of some crime? A kidnapping?

Where were the children?

Panic spun like a wind devil through her mind. She sampled the air. But she could scent no trace of the children, and that absence brought a sense of relief.

Dawn light reached into the courtyard as the bat clambered around the edge of the shade to the interior of the open window. With infrared eyes the bat distinguished four figures in the room, all female, still lying upon their sleeping pads, but awake. One of the four seemed old and frail, her shoulders hunched as she sat up on her mat. Two were younger, although mature. The fourth was small and lithe, a girl halfway to womanhood. This child stood up, laughing at some joke that she'd been told. Then she turned to the window and pulled at the cords on the side, rolling up the shade. The startled bat burst into flight, squeaking slightly as it wheeled about the room above the frightened, upturned faces of the women. They cried out in wonder, even as they ducked to avoid the leathery wings. Then the bat dashed out of the open window, Hanan frantically urging it toward home.

It wasn't me, Hanan thought. She sat alone on the veranda, still stunned at the news brought home by her ghost.

The children were with their tutors. Seyyed had gone out on business. The servants had cleared the breakfast dishes. But Hanan continued to sit, remembering the upturned face her ghost had seen in the dawn light. A girl's face, a child of thirteen or fourteen, just past the age of menarche. Hanan remembered that face. It had belonged to her once, when she was thirteen or fourteen.

It wasn't me.

Yet it was. The scent trail was exactly the same as her own, made so by

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the changes of puberty. No two people had the same scent signatures; she knew this. Except identical twins. And the girl in the slum could not be her twin. Hanan was thirty-eight years old. *"Mother, did you hate me this much!"* she whispered.

Anna Soukotta had despised custom and tradition. She'd never respected the laws that protected the morality and sanctity of human life. She'd believed in the usefulness of atria and of genetic engineering and population control. She'd believed that all human beings lived lives of equal consequence. She'd been an outsider amongst her own people, a rabble-rouser bent on challenging the status quo. Her politics had infuriated Uncle. To punish her, he'd taken Hanan away after his brother was killed. And Mother had never tried to reclaim her. . . .

"I wasn't the daughter you wanted." Intuitively, Hanan understood. She visualized her mother as she must have been then: angry, without a husband, exiled from her family and her class, her own daughter a traitor to her political movement . . . yet still undefeated, uncowed. Stubbornly demanding her agenda from life. "To try again — only you would have thought of it, Mother." Tears squeezed from Hanan's eyes; tears of anger, and rejection. To take a failed daughter back to the womb. Remake her. Set her on a new path. Change the formula of child rearing so that the end product would be more . . . *worthy.*

Hanan's heart swelled with anger, until it was crushed by the heaving confines of her chest. *I am not that bad! I didn't deserve to be replaced.*

"Ma'am, are you all right?"

Her chin jerked up, eyes wide in fear. The manservant stood hesitantly beside the breakfast table. Hanan fought her agitation, forcing a stiff calm onto her face. "Yes, I'm fine. Please leave me alone now."

The manservant nodded uncertainly, and left. In a state of forced detachment, Hanan considered her situation. She had a double living in the Ovens, almost certainly an illegal clone, much younger than herself. Uncle must not discover it. He would kill it if he did.

Fervently, she wished that it had never lived, and yet . . . she didn't want to see it die. An intense curiosity burned in her mind. What was the other like? What was *she* like, in other circumstances?

She stood up abruptly and hurried to her room, quickly changing from her morning gown into a loose-fitting pantsuit and jeweled sandals. A scarf went over her head.

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"Find the manservant," she told the house. "I'm going out."

Hanan rode in the back seat of the Mercedes while the manservant drove. The roads were rough, and traffic was slow, the trucks and cars tangling with brightly painted trishaws pedaled by sweating men with huge thighs. Hanan stared out the window, unseeing, until the car drew up in front of a little shop advertising herbal remedies. She emerged into the sun's searing rays. "Stay here," she told the manservant as he hurried to help her with the door. "I'll be only a moment." He frowned unhappily. It was his duty to keep her in sight at all times. But her stern scowl convinced him that this time there would be an exception. She entered the shop, and the door closed between them.

A young woman emerged from a back room to greet her. Hanan turned over a credit card. "I'd like to purchase information," she said. "A new two-story building. Walled courtyard. Between Chu Fong's store and the canal. What is it?"

The woman fingered Hanan's credit card, her eyes vacant for a moment as she thought. "Ah. You mean the mission."

"A Christian mission?" Hanan was surprised. Mother had never thought much of Christians, or Muslims, or anyone else of faith.

"No. They call it the Tenacious Flower Mission. Secular." She glanced down at the credit card, then back up at Hanan. "Expensive."

"I'll pay."

"It's a political refuge. For the followers of Anna Soukotta. They say her daughter lives there."

Hanan felt her hands begin to tremble. She pressed them firmly against her sides. "Thank you," she said, and nodded. The young woman scanned her credit card and deducted an amount that Hanan didn't bother to check.

That night, Hanan sent her ghost back to the Tenacious Flower Mission. The bat was hungry, and difficult to control. The ghost let it hunt insects for a few minutes in the courtyard before forcing it down under the eaves of the building. She searched for her own scent, and came across it almost immediately. It led through an open window. She hesitated a moment. She'd never taken the bat deep inside a strange building. What if someone saw her? The air was thick with the scent trails of many individuals. What if someone attacked her with a broom? The bat could be killed.

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But curiosity forced her on. She crawled to the edge of the window and peered in at a small bedroom, vacant now, the sleeping pads and blankets neatly laid out on the floor. A single battery-powered light was mounted near the doorway. Hanan launched herself into the dim yellow glow and crossed the room, alighting on the doorframe. She peered past that to see a long, dark hallway, lit only by the dull glow of lights from adjoining rooms.

The scent trail led to the right. She followed it, flying close to the ceiling, darting through the shadows almost faster than a human eye could follow. She flitted past a doorway. The scent of herself almost overwhelmed her. She squeaked and wheeled, her feet clawing for a grip on the doorjamb.

Voices came at her from the room beyond. She peered past the doorway. The radiant light of a lantern hanging from the ceiling almost blinded her in the second before the bat's enhanced eyes could adjust. Then she saw herself. A pretty young girl in a button-front gauze shirt and blue sarong, her black hair bound in a neat bun against the back of her neck. In a gentle voice, she coached seven grown men in the art of reading. Each man held an electronic book. By turns, they read passages from it. Hanan's ghost recognized the text. Hadn't Mother read her the draft when she was only ten years old? She hadn't understood the meaning then, but the words had stuck. *Empowerment: The Common Person's Guide to Freedom*, by Anna Soukotta, had been banned in the republic for over twenty years.

THE CLONE'S name was Ari. A simple, common name. She worked as a teacher at the Tenacious Flower Mission. And, it was claimed, she was the daughter of Anna Soukotta. These were the only facts Hanan had obtained after an hour's observation. She needed to know more, to ask questions. Time, then, to visit Ari in person.

The manservant accompanied her into the Ovens. He frowned disapprovingly when she told him their destination, but he said nothing. When they arrived at the mission, he armed the Mercedes, then followed Hanan through the open gates.

Pathways paved with flakes of recycled concrete crisscrossed through the mission's courtyard. Newly planted fruit trees and thriving vegetables filled the gardens. Vines grew on the walls. A few white-haired women

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tended the plants. They paused in their work to watch Hanan. One of them spoke a soft greeting, which Hanan politely returned. "Wait for me here," she told the manservant. Then she mounted the steps and entered the mission building.

It was cool inside only by contrast to the blazing heat in the courtyard. Hanan missed the gentle purr of the mist nozzles that cooled her own garden. As she began to look about, a woman very near her own age appeared from a hallway. She was dressed in neat though worn clothing. "Madam?" she asked with a friendly smile.

"Good day," Hanan said. "Forgive me for not having an appointment, but I've come to see Ari. I've heard much about her that I approve, and I'd like to meet her myself, perhaps make a contribution to her cause."

The woman's open expression immediately tightened with suspicion. "We have an Ari here," she said. "But she's just a novice teacher. Perhaps you meant —"

"No," Hanan interrupted, determined to come swiftly to her point. "I meant Ari, the daughter of Anna Soukotta."

The woman stiffened. Her face took on the cool, unyielding character of an ivory carving. "There's no such person here," she said shortly. "And we have no political affiliation. We're simply a school for the poor. You cannot be a friend if you repeat that name under our roof."

Hanan's voice didn't change in tone. "Please tell Ari that the *first* daughter of Anna Soukotta is here to see her."

The woman squinted in hard suspicion. But as she examined Hanan's face, fear trembled across her lips. "You are . . . ?"

"Yes. You recognize me, don't you?"

"Yes. I-I —"

"Just bring Ari. I wish to meet her."

The woman nodded uncertainly. "Please to . . . follow me." She beckoned, and Hanan trailed her through a hallway lit only by diffuse daylight drifting in from adjacent rooms. She smelled flowers and frying vegetables. So much less intense than the same odors encountered through the bat's sensorium.

They came to a doorway. The woman peered past the edge of the curtain that covered it. Hanan could hear Ari's voice coming softly from the room beyond. "She's teaching a class," the woman said.

"Summon her now. It would be dangerous for all of us if I'm here too long."

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"Yes, ma'am." With a delicate hand, she lifted the curtain. "*Ari!*" she called in a whispered hiss. "*Ari!*"

Ari looked up in mild surprise. Hanan stared at her greedily. So young, so pretty.

"Ari, come," the woman called nervously, as the men in the classroom turned to stare. "It's important."

Ari excused herself and came in soft steps to the door. Her gaze swept past the woman, to fix on Hanan. There was recognition in her eyes. "So you've come already."

They sat on cushions on the floor of a room whose sliding shoji doors had been thrown open to the heat of the courtyard. Ari served her fruit juice without ice. "How did you find me?" she asked.

"I can't say that. Be satisfied that no one else knows you're here."

"You understand what I am?"

Hanan squinted. "Do *you* know?"

Ari nodded wearily. "Mother believed in honesty in all things. Nothing has been kept from me. I know that I am you, set upon a different path."

Hanan felt a shudder of despair rush through her. She sipped her juice, focusing for a moment on the sweet, fruity flavors to distract her mind. "*Why?*" she asked at last.

"That question's been an agony to you, hasn't it?" Ari said. She sighed. "Anna Soukotta had lost her first daughter. She'd lost *you*, Hanan, my sister-self. You must understand. She was alone. Her beloved husband was long dead, her daughter gone, her political career in shambles. She'd spent three years in the tidal prison. She wanted a *legacy* —"

"*I was not dead,*" Hanan said between clenched teeth.

Ari nodded sadly. "She knew that she'd wronged you. She wanted to atone for that. To do better. . . ." Ari's voice trailed into silence. "I'm sorry. This must be so painful."

Hanan wrestled her passions into a still, warm mass. "She must have died shortly after you were born."

"Yes. I never knew her."

"But how did you survive?"

"The Followers cared for me."

Hanan's puzzlement must have shown, because Ari smiled in apology. "The Followers: three women devoted to Mother. They never married.

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They dedicated their lives to my upbringing and education. Through their memories, I've come to know our mother. I owe them everything."

Hanan wondered how much the tool must owe its maker. "Then you continue our mother's work."

"Yes, but more quietly than she. I'm neither her equal nor her replacement. But I do what I can. As do you."

Hanan flinched. "What I do is insignificant."

"Not to those you help."

Hanan refused to argue her own competence. She'd long ago accepted what she was. She said: "You're teaching from illegal books."

"Yes."

Hanan stared at her hands. Her long fingers were laced together, working against each other. "This is very dangerous. If you're discovered, you could be executed. Your existence is illegal. If they learn what you really are. . . ."

"Yes, the Followers have told me this. And I don't want to die. But the work is very important."

"You risk too much!"

"Please don't take offense. It's not likely anyone will discover that we're the same."

Anger flared in Hanan's chest. "You think that's it? You think I'm here because I'm worried about your connection to me?"

Ari looked suddenly uncertain. "You have children. It's natural to worry about . . . these things. Perhaps you shouldn't have come here."

"Perhaps you should be more secretive about your parentage."

But Ari shook her head. "I won't hide it. The name of Anna Soukotta gives me a voice here. And if I'm arrested, I'll be executed for my atrium, long before it's discovered — how did you put it? — *what I am.*"

Hanan felt her heart stumble. "You have an atrium?" The words were thieves slipping past her teeth.

Ari nodded. "Mother gave it to me. She has said that atria were made illegal only because they empower the people."

A soft moan of fear issued from Hanan's throat. Did Ari suspect her atrium was a duplicate, too? "You shouldn't have told me that," she hissed, seeking to end this vein of conversation.

But Ari gazed at her with calm eyes and said: "I know Mother gave you an atrium as well."

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Hanan bit down on her cry of protest. Her lips pressed together in a thin, trembling line. She closed her eyes and envisioned oceans of ice; vast, sterile expanses of utter cold. Her heart slowed. Her breathing calmed. "Never say that again," she whispered. She opened her eyes, to see Ari gazing at her in concern.

"I'm sorry," Ari said. "Perhaps I shouldn't have — It might be better if you go now."

"Yes," Hanan agreed. "But I . . . I wish you'd give me your atrial address."

Ari smiled, as if she'd been waiting for such a request all along.

At home, Hanan sought out copies of Anna Soukotta's writings. There were none in Seyyed's library, of course. She inquired by e-mail at several political bulletin boards, but none of the operators knew her; no one would admit to possessing the illegal manuscripts. Finally she ordered them from overseas.

All the while, she watched herself from a distance with disbelieving eyes. *Why am I doing this?* The question gnawed at her, though the answer was simple. She needed to understand her mother. She needed to know what had driven Anna Soukotta to seek a dangerous life when she might have lived to a very old age in comfort and joy.

Even more, Hanan needed to know why she herself had made a different choice.

The computer beeped the arrival of the texts. Hanan downloaded them into her electronic book, then took it with her when she curled up under the covers. The children were asleep. Seyyed was working on his accounts. Outside, the mist nozzles softly cooled the night. The bat was off watching over Ari.

Hanan switched on the book.

Uncle called early next morning to say that he would join them for breakfast. Hanan sat across the table from him, feeling like a rat caught in the cobra's gaze. Uncle seemed quite pleased with himself. He laughed and joked with Seyyed and Hamal. He even complimented Sari on the flower arrangement she'd prepared for the table. All the while, Hanan could feel the cobra's measuring eye as he prepared to strike. She forced herself to eat a bowl of fruit and a dish of rice. Let the cobra have a fat rat; she refused to allow him to feed upon her guilt.

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"There is a minor matter we need to discuss, Seyyed," Uncle said after the breakfast dishes had been cleared away and the children sent off to their studies. "Perhaps your office would be more appropriate?"

"Of course, Uncle."

"Oh." He looked at Hanan slyly. "Would you join us, too?"

She nodded. Her breakfast was a painful weight in her stomach. *Let him eat a sick rat,* she thought.

She sat upon a couch in Seyyed's office. Uncle took the recliner. Seyyed called for tea, then seated himself at her side. Uncle smiled at them. "You've always made me proud, Hanan."

She blinked, taken aback.

Uncle pretended not to notice. "I will say up front that there is nothing more important than family. You know this is so, Hanan, because I took you in when my brother died, and raised you as the child I never had. I didn't do this because of any love I held for you. As we both must acknowledge, I barely knew you at the time. To be cruelly blunt, I suspected I was making a grave error in bringing you into my house, perhaps even risking my political career. Yet I adopted you anyway, because you were my brother's daughter."

"Yes, Uncle. And I am always grateful."

He feigned surprise. "Are you? But your mother was a seductive woman, Hanan. She led my brother away from decent society, and corrupted him with her venal ways."

Hanan felt her cheeks heat up. In shame or anger? She couldn't tell. She bowed her head; studied her long fingers interlocked in a temple built of tension. Seyyed's own dark hand eclipsed hers. He squeezed slightly, to let her know his love. "Surely Hanan has proven herself worthy of your generosity, Uncle," he said. Hanan could hear a faint thread of anger in his voice, just enough to let Uncle know he wouldn't tolerate further insults to his wife. Hanan bowed her head still farther; her shoulders hunched as she silently chastised herself. Did she think she was risking only herself by pursuing Ari? Had she forgotten that Seyyed, too, could be hurt?

"Hanan has been a perfect daughter for me," Uncle said gently. "A blessing to a man who never enjoyed children of his own."

Hanan looked up in surprise . . . to meet the cobra's certain gaze.

"But Anna Soukotta was a seductive woman. *And* she was your mother. It's only natural for you to feel curiosity about her life. Frankly, I'm sur-

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prised you waited this long."

"Uncle, I'm sorry —!" Hanan cried. Seyyed grunted a startled question. Uncle sliced the air with his hand in a gesture that demanded silence.

"You have two perfect children, Hanan. And an esteemed husband who loves you. Remember them, late at night, when restless yearnings take hold of you. Think of them. Go to your husband's bed. You'll be yourself again by morning."

Hanan squeezed Seyyed's hand and nodded. "Thank you, Uncle," she whispered, shivering with relief. "Thank you."

WHAT DID you think you were doing?" Seyyed shouted. "Did you think no one would notice? Does our security mean so little to you? Why, Hanan? Just tell me why! You hated your mother; that's what you've always said."

Hanan huddled on the couch and sobbed. Each angry word from Seyyed was a blow to her flesh. Other husbands screamed at their wives, beat their wives. But not Seyyed. Each day of their life together was a day of love. Now she'd hurt him. "I'm sorry, Seyyed. I don't know why I did it. I don't know what came over me. I just —" She groped for an explanation, something to say that might soothe him. "I heard that in the Ovens, people are talking about Anna Soukotta again. I . . . I never really knew her. I wanted to know why so many people loved her . . . when I did not. I wondered what it was about Anna Soukotta that could inspire people after all these years. I might have wondered if I had any of that in myself . . . if anyone would continue to attend to me after such a span of time."

"I'm here, aren't I?" His voiced was pained. He was down on his knees beside her. He put his arms around her neck. "You have inspired me, Hanan. I have loved you, and thanked Allah for you, every day of our marriage. I couldn't bear to lose you. Please don't risk Uncle's anger. You and I, we live in a perfect world. Don't break it."

"I don't want to, Seyyed! You and the children are my life. I would die without you."

"Then you will never do this again."

She felt the cool touch of his cheek against her own. Smelled the male scent of him. Pulled him closer until his breath was warm on her ear. "What if Uncle had not adopted me?" she whispered her nightmare. "Where would I be now?"

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"It doesn't matter."

"Seyyed!" She pleaded for understanding. "Haven't you ever wondered how you might have turned out under different circumstances? Look at *my* life. What if Father hadn't been killed? What if Mother had really loved me? Who would I be today?"

"You would be no one, because you would be dead. Hanan! Remember it's I who loves you."

The argument petered out, but his anxiety remained. He seemed almost afraid to leave her alone that day. They made love on the couch. He served her tea. She sang a love song for him while they worked together in the garden, gathering flowers for his office while Sari and Hamal played a noisy game of tag. And she knew that he was right. They lived in a perfect world. Why, then, couldn't she forget about Ari?

Night came, and she and Seyyed made love again. He fell asleep in her bed, something he hadn't done for many years. But Hanan remained awake. She sat, watching his breathing, the peaceful lines of his face as he slept. She knew the flaws in him: his shortness of temper when interrupted in his work; his impatience when the children made errors; his insistence on her impeccable appearance, at home or in public. He was not an easy man to live with. But sleep banished all the nettles. Times like this, he seemed an almost perfect being. And that only enhanced her anguish.

She kissed him softly on the forehead — an ambivalent apology for her imminent betrayal. He was her sun. But Ari was a terrible moon shadow gliding darkly across his face. Rising from the bed, she called the bat.

It had been out hunting insects near the house. When she plucked it from the curtain, its fur was slightly damp from the mist nozzles. She studied its face in the dim illumination of a night-light mounted low on the wall. A homely creature, dark and secretive, without influence in the world. This was her true face. The beauty that Seyyed treasured was only a mask. If he could see inside her, this is what she'd look like. Nothing at all like Ari.

No, Ari was a being entirely different. Ari was her diametric opposite. Boldly using the name of Anna Soukotta. Teaching openly from illicit texts. Shaping the world. Ari couldn't be her double. *"I must protect her."* This had become a mandate in Hanan's mind, for reasons maternal. She'd come to see Ari in the same way she saw her children — derived from herself, but utterly different.

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Inside her atrium, Hanan assembled a ghost, then downloaded it into the bat. "Watch over her," she whispered as she set the creature free in the night.

Explosives! The bat had carried Hanan's ghost deep into the Ovens before she detected the molecular trace. It excited a priority code in the bat's databank, and the creature wheeled about automatically to pick up the track again. The scent was a blazing gold arrow, pointing down an alley toward the Tenacious Flower Mission. Hanan urged the bat to top speed.

She found the first mine placed on the mission wall not an arm's length from the gate. It was hidden behind a squatter's tent in which four young children slept with their mother. Hanan hesitated for almost twenty seconds while the bat searched out more mines. Finally she consulted her atrial library for Ari's address. Never before had she phoned anyone from an atrium. It was too dangerous. Such conversations were too easily overheard. But tonight, she had no choice.

"Get out!" she cried as soon as Ari acknowledged her. "Get out! The building's mined, inside and out. My uncle has found you already. There are explosives planted on the walls. There's one by your bedroom. Run, run, run!"

Ari's voice came to her, weighted with stress. "How do you know? Hanan, where are you? What have you heard?"

"Run, Ari. There's no time to explain."

"What kind of explosives are they? Maybe they can be disarmed."

"No, it's too late. There are too many. Run now. I don't know when they're set to go off." She circled the courtyard, her sonar pinging against walls and windows. To her relief, she heard Ari shout an echo of her warning. People awakened. Her sonar caught them as they ran sleepily through the courtyard and out to the street. Ari was with them. Hanan followed her. Watched her run in her nightshirt through the alleys ringing the mission, shouting and banging on tents to awaken the squatters. "Get clear of the walls!" she yelled. "Get clear of the walls! We're under attack!"

"Ari!" Hanan called. "You must save yourself. Get away —"

The explosives went off. Each one had been expertly placed, and most of their force was directed into the building. Still, the explosion knocked the bat into the air and deafened its sonar receptors. Hanan could barely

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control it as it tried to flee in panic. "Ari! Ari!" she cried. "Answer me, child. Are you all right?" As she brought the bat around, she could see the mission: a jumbled pile of dust and mortar, some of the debris on fire. Bodies lay in the streets around it. Moans of anguish filled the air. She sought Ari's molecular trail, but the explosion had blown all scent tracks out of the air. "*ARI!*"

"I'm here, Hanan." Her voice sounded strained, as if she spoke through gritted teeth.

"You're hurt."

"Just a little. Oh Hanan, why did they do this to us?"

Hanan found her kneeling in the street, cradling in her lap the bloodied body of one of the Followers — the old woman with the hunched shoulders.

"I'll have money sent to you," Hanan said. "I'll find you a new place to live."

Ari lifted her face to the night. Tears ran down her cheeks. "I don't know where you are, Hanan, but I thank you. You saved many lives tonight. I only wish you could have saved just one more."

Back at home the true Hanan still lay awake in her bedroom. When the sound of a distant explosion reached the house, she sat up, her ears straining the dark for more information. After a while, she heard sirens. Seyyed stirred sleepily, asked her what was the matter. "There was an explosion in the Ovens." He went back to sleep. She got out of bed. It was past midnight. Worry fluttered against her breast like moths against a window. She put on fresh clothes, then went to the study to use the telephone. She started to punch in Ari's atrial address, then remembered: the phone kept a record of all outgoing calls. She put the receiver down and stared into space.

The telephone beeped softly.

She started, then picked up the receiver, only to hear a dial tone. The soft beeping went on, and suddenly she realized it wasn't the phone at all, but the atrium inside her head. She hadn't heard that sound since Mama had tried to get her to use her atrium so many years ago. She shivered. Mama had been the only one to ever call her. No one else knew her atrial address.

The beeping went on.

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What to do? She remembered. Tentatively, she requested a caller I.D.

Information flooded her mind like a lost thought suddenly recalled. The caller was herself. The ghost of herself riding the bat. She hesitated. She'd never conferred with her ghost before, afraid of what that might say about her soul (divided? or existing outside her, so that she was . . . not?) And it had seemed a vanity, too, a greater crime than simply absorbing the memories of the ghost and reflecting upon them as she would upon experiences encountered in a dream. . . .

"Ah . . . hello?" she said tentatively, unsure if she must speak aloud.

"Get out!" her own voice seemed to shout in her ear. "I had to telephone Ari. Now they know about us. Get out of the house before they come for you."

Hanan's eyes flew wide. "But the children —!"

"Leave them. Seyyed will care for them. Uncle can't touch Seyyed."

"I-I can't —"

"Uncle knows about the atrium. Get out now, before it's too late."

"But where can I go?" she cried, looking around in panic, as if the answer lay somewhere in the walls of a home that could no longer shelter her. "There's nowhere to go. I can't get out of the country."

"Go to Ari. It's our only chance."

"To the mission? That's no shelter."

"To the streets! The mission has been bombed into rubble. Hide in the streets, but go *now!*"

Hanan hurried toward the stairs, her slippers soundless on the polished wooden floor. Uncle was coming. She was leaving her children. She must go in their rooms and look at them one last time. But there was no time. They would hate her when she was gone. Seyyed would hate her. Once out the door, she could never come back. And no time to say good-bye.

"Mama!"

Sari's frightened whisper reached her as she started down the stairs. "Sari! You must go back to bed."

"Mama, where are you going? What's wrong?"

Hanan gazed back at her, agonized. She looked so frightened! Hanan wanted to hold her, hug her, tell her that everything would be all right. Her mouth opened, but the lie that she'd intended didn't fill it. Instead, the truth raced out. "Sari, I have to go away! I've done something — something

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—" Tears blurred her vision. "Uncle will be coming for me. I have to be gone before he comes. Sari, I love you —"

Sari surged forward and flung her arms around Hanan. "Take me with you! Don't leave me here with Uncle."

Hanan stumbled back in shock. "I can't take you, Sari. It's too awful. You must stay here. Daddy will protect you."

Her arms tightened around Hanan, and she began to sob. "No! Uncle tells Daddy what to do. And Uncle will hate me when you're gone. Take me with you, Mama. You can't leave me here."

Hanan shook her head. She could never take Sari into the streets, into that Hell. Sari would die there. "Let me go, let me go!" She fought to break the sobbing child's grip.

"Hanan!"

She looked up to see Seyyed, his hair tousled, fear in his eyes. Her gaze shifted back to Sari. "Go to your father," she ordered in a cold, commanding voice. "He'll protect you." Then she shoved the child away and hurried down the stairs.

Seyyed bounded after her. "Hanan!"

She spun about, her hand out to ward him off. "Don't question me!" she cried. "And don't try to protect me. You are innocent. The less you know —"

The door behind her burst open. Seyyed looked past her, and she could read her fate in his expression, and in the single word shaped by his silent lips. *Uncle.*

Slowly, she turned.

Uncle stood just inside the doorway, his hard gaze fixed on her, his lips parted to show his teeth. Four powerful-looking young men in military uniforms stepped around him and took up positions on either side. "Traitor!" he shouted at her. "Deceiver! *Soukotta!*" In his mouth the name was an oath. "Your ghost was out there tonight. Did you really think you could keep an atrium hidden from me?"

Pent-up anger slammed like a pressure wave through Hanan's brain. "I *did* hide it from you. For years and years. Didn't you ever suspect? Didn't you ever sense what Mother had done to me?"

"Soukotta?" he screamed. His face darkened in rage, and she realized he'd been struck yet again by an old enemy. "Soukotta did this? Why didn't you tell me?"

"You killed my father for less! I didn't want to die."

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"Leave her alone!" Seyyed shouted. "She's *my* wife." He tried to step in front of her, but Uncle flicked a finger at the soldiers, and two of them hustled him aside.

Uncle produced a kem-wand. Hanan had seen the device in police movies. It was armed with a microscopic medical robot intelligent enough to recognize and destroy any artificial organs in her body. She stumbled backward, but one of the soldiers caught her arms. Seyyed was screaming.

"Take Sari out of the room!" Hanan cried. Too late. The wand touched her cheek. She felt a sharp sting, then a tiny worm went speeding through her flesh to her brain. It attacked her mind, entangling itself in the threads of her vision until her sight contorted into a fire storm of hellish lights. She lost her body. Lost all sense of the world. A river roared in her ears. She knew it to be the sound of time rushing by. The days of her past pummeled her, then sped on in no good order. She tried to grasp at them, but they swept past her fingers like a river's current, immaterial energy impossible to seize.

The water closed over her face. She drifted, rolling slowly against the bottom while dreams picked at her whitened flesh. Odd, chaotic, fragmented dreams that gradually faded into darkness.

WHEN SHE finally awoke, she found herself abed, in the room in which she'd grown up in Uncle's house. By the light and the heat and long experience, she knew it must be afternoon.

She was not dead. She studied this fact for a moment, astounded. She didn't even seem to be disabled . . . except for the atrium. That didn't respond, and she had to assume it was really gone. Had her mind been damaged by the loss? She searched her memories, but they seemed complete. She didn't bother to ask herself how she would recognize a loss.

The door opened, and Uncle came in. His rage was gone. By the expression on his face, he seemed almost sorry. "Hanan." He pulled a wing chair up to the bed and sat down. "You must forgive me my anger. I thought you'd deliberately withheld the secret of this atrium from me. But of course, it wasn't your fault. Soukotta did this to you."

She listened, amazed at the prospect that he might forgive her. She wanted to know more, but another question was more pressing. "Uncle —Sari and Seyyed, and Hamal —are they all right?"

Uncle shrugged. "You can imagine. It's been traumatic."

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She nodded. She could imagine all too well. "I was afraid to tell you, Uncle," she whispered. "I didn't know what you'd think."

He gestured helplessly. "At least your mind wasn't damaged. The neurologist tells me you'll be fine." He tapped his fingers against his thigh. "Hanan, I can understand you keeping the atrium a secret. It must have been horrible for you. I'm not quite so certain why you used it in the cause of a rebellion."

Hanan felt a cold sweat break out across her cheeks. Her body ached with a desire for her children.

"Sari isn't well," Uncle said, watching her closely. "She wouldn't be comforted last night, and finally had to be sedated. When Hamal awoke this morning and learned what had happened, he argued with his father and tried to strike him. Seyyed is considering a divorce." Uncle leaned closer. "Who was the girl at the mission, Hanan? This one you called 'Ari'?"

Hanan went very still. There could be only one reason Uncle had asked her this question. Ari must still be free. She looked sideways at Uncle. "I don't know who she is. I met her by chance. She seemed like an upstanding person. I wanted to make a donation to the mission. I didn't know she taught Mother's philosophies —"

"Don't lie to me, Hanan. I already have cause enough to be annoyed with you. Who is this Ari?"

Hanan realized that Uncle would have had hundreds of people from around the mission interrogated. He would have heard that Ari claimed Anna Soukotta for her mother. "Ari may be my sister," Hanan allowed. "We look very much alike. Did you know that?" She felt a hysterical giggle deep in her chest; swallowed hard to contain it.

"Ah yes," Uncle said. "So you've heard this rumor that she's your sister. I hoped that was your motive. I can understand it. It's virtuous to be interested in your family." He nodded in satisfaction. "Family is the most important thing."

"I believe that, Uncle," Hanan said carefully. "But do *you* believe she's family? If Ari really is my father's child, she'll be illegal — conceived after his death."

He shrugged his disinterest. "The perpetrator of that has already been punished."

Her lips formed a small, round *o*. So the rules could bend for Uncle's family. Hope fluttered in her chest. Now that her atrium was gone, and

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Ari's origins forgiven, couldn't her life be repaired? "Uncle, might we bring Ari home? If she's really my sister, she belongs with me."

A brittle smile moved Uncle's lips. "That was my thought. But we have to find her first. The longer it takes to find her, the more frustrated my men will become. Anger may drive them to make a blunder that we'll all regret. . . ."

Hanan didn't mistake his meaning. "I understand, Uncle. And if I knew how to help you, I would."

He left. Hanan waited a moment, then tried the door, but it was locked. There was no phone in the room. She paced the length of the patterned carpet, thoughts of her family and of Ari mixing incoherently with thoughts of herself, of soldiers hunting, of the choices she'd made in her life. The afternoon faded, and night came on. A servant brought her a meal. She ate it by the glass window that overlooked the courtyard. The air in Uncle's house was cold and sterile with air-conditioning. The servant returned to claim her tray. She sat by the window, thinking, waiting for news of Ari. She started when a soft scratching sounded against the glass.

At first, she saw only a dead brown leaf clinging to the outside sill. Then she realized it was the bat. How could it have found her? Then she leaned forward in horror, staring into its tiny, artificial eyes as they sought her through the window. Her ghost must still exist behind those eyes. A part of her that she could now never reclaim. And then a second realization: her ghost must know where Ari was hidden. If only it could tell her. Then she might guide Uncle to Ari before the ruthless soldiers did her harm.

She stood up and shoved her chair out of the way. There were louvers beneath the large window. Judging by the gray scum in their seams, they probably hadn't been opened in years. She pushed on one. It resisted at first, then slowly turned. The bat fluttered down to the opening and clambered into the room. Belatedly, Hanan wondered if an alarm would sound.

She picked up the bat, cradling its soft, furry body against her cheek. She knew that she should summon Uncle, show the creature to him, explain everything. He would measure her honesty by that. He would also destroy the bat, and Ari would be lost.

She held the bat in front of her face. If she spoke, her ghost would hear her, and understand. "Find Ari," she said. "Tell her to call Uncle. She must

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give herself up. If she does, Uncle will forgive her. He understands that she's *family*. And she can survive the loss of the atrium. Tell her to come home." She shoved the bat back out past the louvers just as Uncle opened the door.

"Ari!" Hanan's ghost shouted desperation at the fugitive's address.

"Hanan?" The answering voice was sleepy, uncertain.

"Yes, of course!" Hanan cried. She was trapped. Trapped! A ghost condemned to remain forever outside her own body. Never would she feel its pleasures again. Never to walk or run or eat or cry. But she was not powerless. She sensed that Sari and Hamal might have a mother again if Ari were delivered to Uncle. From the fear-focused viewpoint of her new existence, nothing else seemed to matter.

"I'm coming back, Ari," she called over the telephone network as she drove on tired wings through the humming city. "I have a message from your sister: they're hunting you, but we have a chance to survive . . . if you call Uncle."

"What?"

Quickly, the ghost explained: "You have no choice. You can't hide forever. They *will* find you. But Uncle knows that you're family, that you're the sister of Hanan. He'll forgive you. He'll take you in because you're his brother's child, just as he did for Hanan. Your sister has given up her atrium. You must do the same. But she says you can survive that. You must come home."

"Give up the atrium?"

"Yes. In trade for a peaceful life, a perfect life." She'd finally caught Ari's scent. It was a discontinuous trace at first, but then the track widened into a clear path through the streets. The ghost flew low, to drink it in, skimming the startled, upturned faces of the street people.

"Give up my mother, too?"

Now the ghost saw, just ahead, the crumbling apothecary shop where Ari had taken refuge. She flitted under the eaves and quickly located the hole in the termite-eaten boards she'd discovered earlier that night. She crawled through, until she could poke her tiny snout into the room. Light came from a flashlight set into a niche on the wall. Ari sat on a worn brown cushion that might have been stripped from an old sofa. A salve glinted on her arms and bare shoulders, where it had been applied to her

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burns. Three other people huddled near her, two of them with small revolvers resting in their laps. "Our mother betrayed the family and destroyed our father," the ghost said.

Ari's lips twisted in irritation. "Your *uncle* destroyed our father."

The ghost knew this to be true. So she didn't argue. She used it against Ari. "Uncle will destroy you, too. You must come home."

"No." Simple as that. Not even questioning the offer. A bald "no," and the ghost felt her world begin to fray. Ari said: "You never understood who mother was, did you, Hanan? I always envied you because you knew her. But perhaps I was wrong. You may have been too close to her to see. But through death and distance, *my* mother has taught me things that are more important than simple family. I'm here to give voice to the many who have no choice. I am my mother's tool. I am her servant. I am *home.* Tell Uncle he must hunt me down."

"No, Ari! You must reconsider," the ghost cried. "If you don't come home, I'll never have my children back. Ari, they'll be without a mother. Come home, come home. They are your children, too —"

Ari cut the connection. The ghost stared at her, aghast. She tried to call her again, but Ari refused to answer. The child sat in the cool, dim interior of the apothecary shop, staring across the room at nothing. Tears welled up in her eyes and eased down across her cheeks. Still, she refused to answer.

So Hanan entered a new address and identified herself: "Uncle. It's Hanan."

Uncle's gruff voice came to her a moment later as he spoke into his telephone. "Who is this?"

"Hanan," she repeated, feeling a whisper-hiss of anger break through her habitual submission. This was Uncle, and he was a murderer, and she'd always known it. But there had always been too much to lose to risk turning against him. Even now.

"You're not Hanan," he said. "I know where Hanan is."

The anger grew, like a tiny fire burning in a dark closet, heating the fuel around it before bursting into a violent blaze. "I'm Hanan's *ghost,*" she said, in crisp, clear syllables. "You trapped me outside of my body, Uncle, when you destroyed my atrium. How will I ever go home now?"

"You must erase yourself," Uncle said. Did she hear a note of fear in his

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voice? "You are an illegal simulation."

"I am with Ari."

There was a moment of silence, a great warring silence in which Uncle debated the possibilities entailed in this phone call. Finally he said: "Where is she?"

"Will you let your Hanan go home?"

"This is no time to bargain."

"It's the only time I'll have something to bargain *with*."

Uncle took a moment to consider this. Then: "All right. If we find Ari, I'll send my Hanan home. And then you'll return to my house and fly to my hand, where I will kill you."

Hanan quailed. There could be no afterlife for a simple electronic ghost. Her end would be an empty end, an arrested signal, darkness.

"Hanan?" Uncle probed for a response.

"Will you swear to only capture Ari, then?" she whispered. "And not kill her? I know this is best for her. But you must promise she won't be killed."

"If she's my brother's daughter, I'll do what I can."

And that was the most she'd get out of Uncle, she knew. So she gave him directions to the apothecary shop.

SOMETIME IN the hours between midnight and dawn, as the true Hanan paced the width of her prison bedroom or sat stiff-backed in the chair beside the window, a realization came to her, one absurdly obvious in retrospect. She'd always been a prisoner under Uncle's care. Before, the cage had been large enough to contain Seyyed and the children, and she'd let that soothe her, blind her. But it had been a cage nonetheless. Now that the boundaries of her life had shrunk, she felt them more.

She paced across the room, stared at the closed louvers, then paced again. What was happening out there? She'd heard nothing since she'd released the bat. Uncle had refused to give her any information, though she'd explained to him about the bat and why she'd used it once again. Through it all, his face had been a wooden mask. She had no way to tell if he believed her.

She stared at the louvers. If she could remove them one by one, she could slip out the window, perhaps climb down to the ground

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floor. There might be a way out of the courtyard, a chance to contact Seyyed. Together, they could spirit the children out of the country. . . .

But Uncle would see to it that they were caught. Seyyed would be shot, and the orphaned children raised under Uncle's supervision. Her heart seemed to stretch in a painful wail. There was too much to lose, too much to lose. She must wait. Dawn was at hand. Be patient. Ari would come home, and everything would be all right.

The door burst open, and she jumped as if she'd been shot. Uncle. He had an object in his hands. He held it up for her to see. The bat. He held it by the wingtips. Half its head had been blown away. Her heartbeat quickened. Tension threatened to burst from her breast in a violent scream. Uncle said. "I wanted you to know that your soul is no longer divided."

She nodded slowly. "And . . . Ari?" Her throat was so dry, she could hardly speak.

"Ah yes. Ari." He released the bat's wings and casually tossed the animal into a corner trash can. "I've been thinking a lot about Ari tonight, and I've grown curious. How did you know she was your sister?"

Hanan shook her head slowly, dismayed at the direction Uncle was taking. "A guess, Uncle," she lied softly. "Her looks; her situation. A few questions to the mission sisters."

"But you never had her tested."

She shook her head, unable to force from her tongue even a single-word reply.

"Well, I have. And she's not your sister, is she?"

Hanan felt a great whirl of gray storm flood her mind. If Uncle knew that, then Ari must have surrendered. Or been captured. Or killed. She grabbed the back of the chair for support."You said you'd protect her!"

Uncle seemed unconcerned. "You told me you never spoke with anyone through the atrium," he said. "Or accessed any library."

She nodded shakily. "That's true, Uncle. Until I — I warned Ari."

"Then how did you learn to clone yourself?"

Her lips parted in astonishment. "I didn't do that, Uncle. It was my mother."

"Anna Soukotta never had time for children."

Hanan nodded eagerly. "She must have come to regret that. So in her last years, she conceived of Ari. What other choice did she have? My father was already dead. He couldn't sire a new child."

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"I understand the guilt a child may suffer. You were always an unworthy daughter in your mother's eyes. Did you think you might turn out better the second time around?"

"I didn't do it, Uncle," she insisted. He must believe her! How could he not believe her?

He said: "Anna Soukotta resided in a state prison for the two years before her death. She died without ever leaving her cell. It would have been impossible for her to create this abomination."

"No. She was in exile!" Hanan wailed. "It was on the news. I saw it. An assassin killed her in exile."

"A politically convenient story. One that you counted on, I see." He turned to go.

Hanan surged after him. She grabbed his arm. "Uncle! You must believe me —"

His fist struck her in the eye. Her head snapped back. The floor slammed against her shoulder. Colored jets of pain erupted in her field of vision as she struggled to her feet. "Uncle! Wait. Don't go!" The door closed behind him. She threw herself against it, screaming. "I didn't do it, Uncle! I didn't do it. It was my mother. My mother! I am innocent. Innocent. Innocent. Please, give me back my life. . . ." She pounded on the door until her fists were numb, and then she sank down to the floor, her spine pressed against the wall. Tears rolled down her face.

Nothing's more important than family. That's why Uncle had carried on a murder spree against his own. First father, then mother, then Ari . . . all to protect the family's propriety. Hanan would be the next victim. She would die for something she hadn't done. And how long could Seyyed survive her? Uncle must suspect Seyyed now, or at least mistrust him. She remembered the bat, stretched between Uncle's fingers. When Seyyed was gone, Uncle would have Sari and Hamal. Another generation of the family to instruct. And when instruction failed, to murder.

She stood slowly and walked to the trash can. Stared down at the carcass of the bat. Its head had been destroyed by the bullet that killed it, but the rest of the body was intact. She knelt and picked it up, then ran her finger slowly along a tiny bone in the right wing until she felt the nodule. There. It hadn't been broken. She smiled. The atrium must have been destroyed before it could issue its suicide signal. She hunched over, trying to hide what she did from the surveillance cameras. Then she

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pulled the wing close to her face and bit hard into the bone. Squeezing the nodule out of the torn wing, she caught it in her hand.

Uncle returned at midmorning to offer her his own kind of clemency. "Nothing is more important than family," he explained, his face a cold study in anger. "That's why I've never put a member of my family on trial. A trial would be humiliating and degrading, and would expose us to ridicule. I believe that justice should be served within the privacy of the family unit."

Hanan rose from the table where she'd been sitting, and stepped across the room toward him. "Is that why you had my father murdered?" she asked quietly. "Instead of trying him for treason?"

Uncle's scowl deepened, but he ignored her question. He said: "A suicide, committed out of remorse, would stanch this scandal."

"I see." She stepped closer still. "And did you assist my mother in suicide as well?"

He bared his teeth in what might have been a grin. This was a subject that pleased him. "Oh yes. I had her shot."

Hanan nodded slowly, rolling the nodule she'd recovered from the bat between thumb and forefinger. The poison it contained was effective only inside a bloodstream. "And Ari — you shot her as well. Even after you *promised* to protect her."

Uncle grunted noncommittally.

"Well, I do agree with you," Hanan whispered, so that he had to lean forward to hear her. "A suicide committed out of remorse would save us all much anxiety." And she crushed the nodule between her fingertips, coating her nails with the clear jelly inside. She had only seconds before exposure to oxygen denatured the poison. She stepped forward. Raised her hand as if about to beg for clemency. Then she raked her nails down the length of his throat, drawing broad lines of blood.

He reared back. "*Bitch!*" But a moment later, his hands were grasping at his throat. His eyes widened, then rolled back in his head. His body began to twitch. Tiny spasms at first, escalating rapidly until he looked like a stick doll shaken on the end of a string. He collapsed to the floor, still shivering, his feet thumping loudly against the carpet while his bowel and bladder gave way.

Hanan turned away in horror. She fled to the bathroom and frantically

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scrubbed at the jelly still clinging to her fingers. A moment later, she was on her knees, heaving on the floor. When the spasm passed, she sat up. Perspiration soaked her face. She stood upon shaking legs and washed her face, careful not to look into the room. She straightened her hair, then set to cleaning the mess on the bathroom floor. When that was done, she returned to the room. Uncle lay on his back, his eyes wide, his tongue protruding from his mouth. Hanan shivered. Now she knew what murder felt like.

She cast about over the floor until she found the broken nodule. She picked it up with shaking fingers and rubbed it on Uncle's nails. Then she raked them against the wounds on his throat until tiny bits of flesh and blood had lodged beneath the nails. This poor deceit wouldn't fool a proper investigation. But she doubted there would ever be one. Uncle had too many secrets that could too easily be revealed.

She returned to the bathroom and scrubbed her hands again, then left the room. She walked silently down the empty hallway. Family business was private business. There were no soldiers set to guard her. In Uncle's room, she found a scarf to cover her head, and dark glasses to go over her eyes. In his office, she found numerous debit cards that didn't require an I.D.

She left by the servants' door. The old woman who'd cooked for Uncle for thirty years stood motionless in a corner of the kitchen as Hanan passed. "*Soukotta,*" she whispered at Hanan's back. It had the sound of a benediction.

Outside, the light and the heat destroyed Hanan's calm. She looked about, panic rising in her chest. Her heart thundered against her ribs as she hesitated, uncertain of which way to go. She had no plan of escape, other than a vague notion of disappearing into the Ovens. Certainly she could not go home. She was a traitor, and the president's men would come after her if they thought she was still alive. So she must disappear. Convince the world that Uncle had achieved justice in his own silent, secret way.

She hurried along the sidewalk, head down, ears and eyes tuned to the activity around her. Few people were about. The police kept the vendors and homeless off the streets of Uncle's neighborhood. Hanan would have preferred the clatter of the Ovens. She was too obvious here. She felt as if

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the security system in every house she passed tracked her progress.

She'd gone only a few hundred meters, when she heard a car approaching from behind. It was going too fast. She began to move toward the inside of the walk.

In this neighborhood, every house was a compound. Tall stucco walls lined the street, and there was nowhere to duck out of sight. She fixed her gaze on a cross street twenty meters ahead. When she felt the car swerve toward her, she began to run.

"Wait!" someone shouted. "We're friends!"

She ran harder. The hot air over the sidewalk swept past her face like the breath of a kiln. The car coasted up beside her, skidded half on the sidewalk. A door opened, and a man she didn't recognize leaped out. She dodged and tried to run the other way, but he was faster. He caught her, one arm around her chest, squeezing so that she could hardly breathe. His other hand went over her mouth, the salty taste of his sweat burning her lips. He dragged her back to the car and fell onto the seat, on top of her. The door slammed shut, and the car zoomed off. Seconds later the sunlight disappeared. The car was driving down a steep slope, tires squealing. It came to a sudden stop in a dimly lit garage. The doors opened, and her assailant hauled her out, his hand still over her mouth.

"Through here!" a woman hissed, and they hauled Hanan downstairs. A door snicked shut behind them, and they were left in utter darkness. The man took his hand away from Hanan's mouth, but he didn't let her go. "You're with friends," he whispered.

She could sense the presence of several people now, the shuffling of feet, the moisture of their breath thick in the air. A flashlight came on. Its narrow beam flashed across her eyes, then came to rest against the floor. In its reflected light, one face stood out amongst the small crowd in the tunnel. *"Ari!"* she whispered.

The second daughter of Anna Soukotta had a smile on her face. Hanan looked at her with amazement. "Forgive me, forgive me," she muttered. "When Uncle came to me this morning. . . ." She shook her head in confusion. "I was sure you must be dead."

"It was close," Ari admitted. "The soldiers learned we were at the apothecary shop. But our lookouts saw them coming. We were out the back door. They hit me with a poison pellet — see here?" She showed Hanan a small wound on her upper arm. "It went right through the muscle.

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The drug knocked me out. But my friends were able to carry me to safety."

"I'm so glad," Hanan whispered.

"The soldiers spent an hour looking for that pellet. I suppose they wanted a tissue sample."

"Did they find it?"

Ari sobered. "I'm sorry, Hanan. I didn't realize until later what your uncle could learn from that."

Hanan hid her face behind her hands. "You shame me! Don't apologize to me. My ghost was probably the one who turned you in. I really believed Uncle when he said he'd let you live."

Ari gazed down at the dusty floor. "I heard later that the soldiers had shot a tiny bat they'd rousted from the shop's rotten walls. I wondered if that was you."

Hanan nodded miserably. She felt herself at the bottom of a very deep pit. "I always had more than I could bear to lose."

"You love your family. There's no shame in that. Risk is easy when you have no one and nothing to lose."

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Hanan shook her head in wonder. "Are you really only fourteen?"

Ari shrugged thoughtfully. "My ghosts have gathered over a hundered years of experience. But I still feel that I'm just a tool, constructed by expert crafters."

"I want to help you."

"Now that *you're* on your own?"

Hanan nodded. "Uncle is gone now. But Sari and Hamal and Seyyed still live in the cage he built for them." That had been tolerable, when she, too, lived inside. Now the view was different.

"It'll be a long war," Ari warned. "And we have no way to take you out of the country."

"I wouldn't leave. There's too much work to be done here. Our mother's work."

Hanan didn't mention what Uncle had said about Anna Soukotta dying in a prison cell. She sensed that Ari needed the myth of her mother's love to sustain her inner strength. Ari *was* a tool, but of the Followers, not of Anna Soukotta. Let her serve her purpose well.

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F&SF Competition

REPORT ON COMPETITION 58

Harlan Ellison suggested a challenging competition in which readers write down eight names of sf/fantasy/horror writers, beginning and ending with the same name. The names had to be linked in some obvious fashion. Many of you tried (pat yourselves on the back — this was difficult!) and most of you succeeded in one way or another. those entrants who did not include clues to the links: *Shame on you!* You pointed out the Competition Editor's vast ignorance. The Editor even consulted various and sundry Editorial Assistants (from famous sf writers to casual office visitors), and while the Assistants had many guesses, we decided that those guesses were not correct. Those of you who wrote in without clues receive the coveted I Am Smarter Than the Editor Award for which you receive our undying perplexity.

FIRST PRIZE goes to Michael H. Payne of Balboa, California, for his wise and witty use of the January F&SF issue in which the contest appears:

Road Dog
Toto
K-9
Mr. Data
Mr. Spock
David Gerrold
Robert Heinlein
Road Dog

(Clue: Jack Cady's Road Dog to the Yellow Brick Road Dog; Dorothy's faithful dog to Dr. Who's faithful dog; Robotic dog to android; logical Star Trek characters; Gerrold wrote for Star Trek; Tribbles suggest creatures in Heinlein's "The Rolling Stones"; Heinlein's "The Roads Must Roll" brings us back to Road Dog.)

SECOND PLACE goes to Denise LeCompte of Toms River, New Jersey for her use of sf writers and their works (no movies, no media, no fictional characters):

Orson Scott Card
George R.R. Martin
Ray Bradbury
Tanith Lee
Robert Reed
Sir Fred Hoyle
Michael Crichton
Orson Scott Card

(Clues: Card to Wild Cards, edited by Martin; Martin to martian to *Martian Chronicles* by Bradbury; "I Sing the Body Electric" to *Electric Forest* by Lee; Lee to *Leeshore* by Reed; *Black Milk* to *The Black Cloud* by Hoyle; *Andromeda Strain* by Crichton; *Eaters of the Dead* to *Speaker for the Dead* by Card)

RUNNERS UP

Timothy Zahn
The Tooth Fairy
Robin Goodfellow
Puck
Una

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Una Persson
Han Solo
Timothy Zahn

(Clues: Zahn is German for tooth; Tooth fairy to the fairy sprite in *Midsummer's Night Dream*; Robin Goodfellow's other name is Puck; Puck is also a character in Kipling's *Puck of Pook's Hill*, which features Una; Una Persson a character in Moorcock's fiction; Una Persson means "one person" to Solo,-Zahn is writing the new Star Wars series of books)

— Charles Duff
Thomasville, Georgia

William Shatner
Charles Williams
C.S. Lewis
Lewis Carroll
Alice Sheldon
James Tiptree, Jr.
James T. Kirk
William Shatner

(Clue: Two Williams; both Williams & Lewis were Inklings; two Lewises; Carroll wrote about Alice; Tiptree is Sheldon's penname; two Jameses; Shatner portrayed Kirk)

— Brick Barrientos
Gaithersburg, MD

COMPETITION 59 (suggested by Mark Ditoro)

FAMILY REUNION: Since summer is the season of travel, family visits and huge reunion picnics, we thought this competition might be appropriate.

It's time to introduce F&SF readers to the relatives of famous writers. Be creative and let us know who these folks are. For example: Meet H.R. Bloch, the psychopathic financial advisor.

Make the families as big as you like, and as unusual as possible. Please send in your responses by June 15.

Rules: Send entries to Competition Editor, F&SF, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Entries must be received by June 15. Judges are the editors of F&SF; their decision is final. All entries become the property of F&SF; none can be returned.

Prizes: First prize, eight different hard cover science fiction books. Second prize, 20 different sf paperbacks, Runners-up will receive one-year subscription to F&SF. Results of Competition 59 will appear in the Oct./Nov Issue.

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Coming Attractions

IN JULY, **Lisa Goldstein** returns to these pages after too long an absence. In "The Woman in the Painting," she manages to combine the feel of the classic story "Portrait of Jenny" with a heart-rending science fiction plot. The story, about a 19th painter obsessed with a mysterious woman, will break your heart.

Ron Goulart provides the issue's lighter touch with "Mom's Cooking." Jeff Varner is taking the 3:07 train from Manhattan to Westport when he finds a sandwich. Peanut butter and banana on whole wheat. It is a gift from Mom — and it isn't something she had hidden in his briefcase as a surprise. Mom hasn't been near his briefcase in four and a half years because, well, Mom is dead.

The inspiration for our cover comes from hot new writer **Elizabeth Hand.** "Justice" is about a reporter for *Our Magazine* who gets assigned to a minor story in Oklahoma concerning cattle mutilations. But when she visits the hidden site where the cattle have died, and has seen the bodies, she realizes that she has a nasty piece of reporting on her hands. It seems the killings could be the work of a small town man seeking vengeance on his ex-wife, or maybe it's something even worse ...

Future issues will feature stories by **Robert Reed, Charles de Lint, and Esther M. Friesner.** We'll mix the best of your favorite writers with a new crop of up-and-coming writers. And now is the time to renew your subscription so that you can reserve a copy of our October/November Anniversary issue. Last year, reviewers called that special issue a not-to-be-missed treat. This year's will be the same.

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